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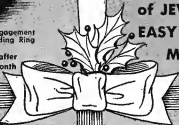
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DETECTIVE TALES

January Issue
Published November 26th



VOL. TWENTY-FIVE

DECEMBER, 1943

NUMBER FIVE

A Smashing Crime Novel

1. **THE CORPSE EXCHANGE**.....*Day Keene* 8
Matt Mercer, ex-sergeant of Marines, woke up to find a blonde corpse in his room. He knew it was a plant. The trouble was, his lovely young wife didn't know it. Neither did Inspector Haig. And the evidence framed Matt for hanging.
2. **NIGHT WATCH AT ANSELMO'S**.....*Philip Ketchum* 50
One girl saved the life of a merchant seaman. The other girl, a soft-lipped Delila of the waterfront, wrecked his ship as surely as though her delicate hand controlled the release mechanism of the torpedo.
3. **HERR MAMLOCK'S SHINY SHOES**.....*D. L. Champion* 84
Concerning a mysterious "Mission to Mexico," a King's ransom in diamonds, and a man who said: "I'd rather be an American crook than a Nazi banker!" and proved it under gunfire.

Six Sensational Short Stories

4. **DEATH'S DOUBLE-ENTRY**.....*Henry Lysing* 32
Willie was a bookkeeper who never made a mistake—until he let Death step in to balance his books.
 5. **THE KILLER CAME HOME**.....*Robert C. Dennis* 38
That night in the fog, Stell learned which of her two men was the smart one.
 6. **GRAY DAWN OVER BROADWAY**.....*Stewart Sterling* 42
This man is dangerous—the all-borough spread the information over both wavebands. But Brad found out, dismayingly, that the girl was dangerous too.
 7. **BLACKED OUT**.....*Avery Johnson* 65
A man has to be good to frame a murder on Uncle Sam.
 8. **THE DEVIL HAS A PITCHFORK**.....*Edward S. Williams* 68
The accidents at Abbot's farm added up to—murder! But proving it was a problem in higher mathematics.
 9. **NEVER A DULL MURDER**.....*Jack Bradley* 78
Detective Dugan, aided by pickpocket Shallock, drank his way through a crime wave—to the consternation of everybody—particularly Captain Barlow.
- And—
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Let the dead speak.
 11. **ODDITIES IN CRIME**.....*Jon L. Blummer* 41
A broken button pointed the finger.
 12. **WHEN GANGDOM RULED**.....*Cedric W. Windas* 77
"Pineapples" for breakfast.

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AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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1 "It happened during a lull, after many hours of continuous bombing. We were operating on casualties brought to the underground emergency theatre. There was a terrific explosion nearby, then such a frightening blackness as could only come in an operating room . . .

2 "That single stray bomb had shattered the two outside electric plants. It would take time to rig up the emergency plant. Meanwhile we had a victim on the operating table, in danger of bleeding to death. I told all the nurses and medical students to get their flashlights . . .



3 "We grouped around the table, giving the surgeon the light he needed to save his patient . . . Because of the highly inflammable ether we couldn't have used a hurricane lamp. This was one of many, many cases where only flashlights with proper batteries could have been used to save life."



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THE CRIME CLINIC

SUPPOSE you were alone in a room where you live, and you knew that somebody was going to kill you.

Suppose you didn't want to die. Suppose that after the hell of a North African campaign, life was sweet to you, and that there was a girl you loved. But suppose there you were in your room anyway, not yet recovered from battle-front injuries. You couldn't get out of your room, and your telephone line had been cut, and there was no one in or out of the house you could appeal to for help.

Suppose you thought it was your wife and one of your very best friends who were going to kill you. Suppose you had good and sound reason to think this, but nobody would believe you because they thought your mind was still a little fuzzy from battle-shock.

So there you were in your room, listening to the clock tick off the last seconds of your life, wondering with what diabolical ingenuity the killer would be able to gain entrance into your sealed chamber.

What would you do? Would you write a letter with the hope that you might have time at the last death-freighted instant to drop it from the window on the chance that a passer-by would pick it up and take it to the proper authorities?

That was what Mark Ogden did.

The scrawl on the outside of his envelope said:

The finder of this letter will please take it straight to the office of District Attorney Dumfries. Do not open it. Do not allow anyone else to touch it. Place it in the hands of the district attorney personally and quickly. This is a matter of life and death.

The enclosure read:

Dear Jim,

I will never live to finish this letter. It may stop in mid-sentence or even in the middle of a word. But I mean to carry it on until the last minute, writing as rapidly as I can, with the purpose of helping you bring to justice the person—or the two persons—who killed me. Because when this letter reaches you—if it ever does—I will be dead. My death will seem to have been accidental. Don't believe that, Jim. You must understand, when you read this, that I have been murdered with malice aforethought....

So Mark Ogden wrote, faster and fas-

ter, in an attempt to beat the certain death which stalked him, pouring out his fears on the paper, putting down the stark facts of a story so frightful, so bizarre, and yet so touchingly human as to surpass belief.

"It's coming now!" Mark Ogden wrote. "I heard it rustling in the grass. Someone has approached this house.

"The lights have gone out! He must have shorted the light-leads outside the house. I can't see these words as I write them. The room is utterly black.

"He's near the door—getting ready—

"Now I know who it is! It is—"

Thus Mark Ogden's letter ended.

But the story does not end here. In a sense the story only begins here. Frederick C. Davis, that masterful and popular writer of detective fiction, goes on to weave the threads of a tangled life drama so terrifyingly real, and building to a climax so smashing, so surprising that you will remember "Let the Dead Speak" for the rest of your life.

* * *

In next month's same memorable issue of DETECTIVE TALES appears the first of a great new crime-detective series by Orlin S. Tremaine. "The Expendable Spy" introduces a startlingly different type of detective character: the Professor Zebulon Bart, better known as "Easy" Bart. This eccentric criminologist, along with his pert-faced, curve-lined feminine assistant, are destined we think, to take their places with the famous crime-solving combines of the day.

They're wacky, they're brilliant, they're—"zany-pate-piffle," and you'll wonder how they manage to live a minute. But they do—and what they turn up would turn any detective bureau green with envy. In fact one of their very first accomplishments is to melt the clothes off Inspector Cardigan, and turn him green! ... Well, don't say we didn't warn you!

And that's not all. In this same big issue appear compelling crime stories and novelettes by such able writing men as Day Keene, Harry Widmer, Robert Turner, Edward J. Donovan and others.

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The Editor.

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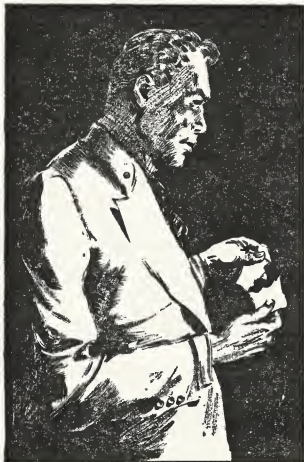


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Mercer hit the alley, running, as lead poured from the third floor window and the fire door.

THE CORPSE EXCHANGE

Dramatic Murder Novel

by **DAY KEENE**

Matt Mercer, fighting ex-sergeant of Marines, had cut his eye-teeth on blood and violence. But that was on the battlefield. The corpse of the blonde girl brought murder smack into his own home, and unleashed a trail of crime that for a while made the Solomon Islands look tame.



CHAPTER ONE

Scarlet Sister Mable

IT WAS late afternoon and beginning to grow dark. Rain beat at the windows in great sullen drops and rushed on, carried by the wind, to drench the Chicago Loop. Ten floors below, across the Drive, the lake pounded the rock breakwater in a fury of spume.

The man at the phone paid no attention to the storm. Suavely insistent, he spoke into the phone. "Of course, Mrs. Charters, you are the one to decide. But if you love your husband as much as I presume that you do—"

He waited, smiling. He could hear the woman at the other end of the connection catch her breath. He could sense her free hand go to her throat in an ecstasy of hope. "I do! Oh, I do," she

told him. "And I am so grateful that you're trying to help me. It's only that I haven't that much ready money. Might I have a few days in which to raise it?"

The man at the phone smiled. "Of course. But understand, you must speak to no one."

"Oh, I promise, I do," Zo Charters gasped. "I won't even tell Matt Mercer. But he and Jack were such friends that I am certain he will lend me the money."

The man at the phone said sharply: "Don't—"

A faint click answered him. Zo Charters had hung up. He considered calling her back, and decided against it. The least false note in the negotiations would cause her to grow suspicious. He got up and paced the floor, cursing softly. He hadn't even known that the Charters woman knew Mercer. Decidedly, something must be done about him. The leather-faced, grizzled, former first sergeant of Marines was no one's fool. If he got wind of what was going on, he would smell out the rest and wreck a potential thirty million dollar racket. . . .

* * *

Long after dawn had streaked the windows of the shabby hotel room with gray, Matt Mercer snored on soddenly, his lined face relaxed in sleep. It was the rumbling of a truck that awakened him.

He lay staring at the ceiling. His lips were dry and cracked and he could taste cheap whiskey on his breath. His head had the usual dull ache that had accompanied most of the one thousand hangovers he had known.

Sherry is going to raise hell with me, he thought. He looked at the luminous dial of the watch on his wrist and deciphered the time with an effort. It was six minutes after seven.

He lay back and closed his eyes, listening for the usual morning noises. The twins should be up by now and demanding to climb in to his and Sherry's bed for their usual morning romp. Magnolia should be clattering pans and dishes in the kitchen. There should be a fragrance of fresh-made coffee.

He failed to hear the twins. There was no sound from the kitchen. A heavy scent of perfume that he had never known

Sherry to use, was mixed with the whiskey fumes. Mercer opened his eyes and stared hard at the ceiling. The plaster was patched and cracked. He turned his head towards the windows. Instead of a landscaped lawn and the house next door, he saw only an unbroken brick wall.

"So I got potzed again and didn't go home last night," he said aloud. "Well, I'll be a lousy ring-tailed monkey. And after all the promises that I made Sherry."

He lay back, half-sick, disgusted with himself, then raised up on one elbow and stared hard at the windows as his mind began to function.

He hadn't gotten drunk the night before. He had closed the office at six, stopped into Tony's for his usual sundowner, downed the one drink, gone out and climbed into his car—and that was the last that he remembered, except that it had been raining, hard.

Mercer was a big man. The cheap springs squeaked as he swung his feet to the floor and made a quick inventory of his possessions. His artificial left arm was still strapped to his chest. His clothes were tossed carelessly on a chair. Shoes, sox, shirt, trousers, coat, top coat, hat, all were on the chair, and dry. His gun was still in its holster. His three-carat diamond ring was still on his finger. The contents of his wallet were intact. He had cashed a one hundred dollar check at Tony's to give Sherry her monthly grocery allowance. He fingered through the bills. There were three twenty dollar bills, two ten dollar bills, and four fives, besides six ones and some change that he remembered having when he had stopped at Tony's.

His head began to throb in earnest. He sat on the edge of the bed cupping his head in his hands and forcing himself to think.

He had had one drink in Tony's. He had phoned Sherry to tell her that he was on his way home. He had walked across the sidewalk through the rain to his car. He had unlocked the door and slid in behind the wheel. . .

There memory ended abruptly. Mercer felt his head for bumps or contusions. There weren't any. One spot ached as much as another.

Sherry would never believe him. She would think that he . . . The big man turned abruptly to stare through the gray of morning at the other half of the bed. There was a mass of blond curls on the pillow. A silken shoulder strap gleamed in the half light. The girl lay very still, her face turned from him.

"Oh, oh," he grunted. "That tears it." He fought a wave of nausea and reached across the bed and shook the shoulder. "Hey. You. Wake up. Where the—?"

THE girl rolled heavily under his touch, her open eyes staring at the ceiling. The flesh of her arms was cold. The eyes were sightless. A good judge of such matters, Mercer estimated that she had been dead at least six hours. He released her shoulder mechanically, got up and pulled the shades, then switched on the ceiling light.

The dead girl was a natural blond in her middle twenties, well formed, attractively made up. A smart suit was folded neatly on the chair on her side of the bed. A swank cloth purse lay on the rug beside them.

Mercer examined the contents of the purse. It contained three one dollar bills, some change, a theatre program, and a compact. There was nothing by which he could identify her. He studied her face. It was vaguely familiar but to the best of his sober knowledge he did not know her. The manner of her death was obvious. There was a small, brown, puckered, bullet hole in her slip under the heart. The gun had been held only inches away. The material surrounding the wound was specked with powder.

He dressed, staring at the girl. She was dead, and he was in a spot. Mercer considered calling Inspector Haig at Central Bureau, then decided against it. His story was too fantastic.

It would be time enough to figure out the whys and wherefores later. Right now he had to get out of the room without being seen. Of one thing he was satisfied. He had touched the girl but once, and that on her shoulder. He scrubbed the shoulder with his handkerchief, then wiped every surface in the room that he might conceivably have touched, including a three-fourths emptied whiskey bottle

that he found standing convenient to his hand on his side of the bed. Satisfied that all evidence that he had been in the room had been removed, he switched off the light and tiptoed into the hall.

He was locking the door behind him when a negro maid, her arms piled high with towels, came shuffling down the hall in carpet slippers. "You checking out, Mister?" she demanded. "It all right to make up your room?"

Mercer hoped that his voice sounded casual. "No. Not yet," he told the maid. "My-er-wife is still sleeping."

She sniffed and continued down the hall.

Mercer wondered if she could identify him. The lights in the hall were dim and at some distance from the door. He found the service stairs and followed them to the lobby. A fat desk clerk was making his seven-thirty calls. Mercer waited until he had made a connection, then strode boldly across the lobby. At most, he thought the clerk could only have seen his back.

The morning air was crisp, with a bite of winter in the wind. A gray fog hung over the Loop. Mercer's car was not at the curb. He had no idea where it was and toyed with the idea of reporting it as stolen. Instead, he joined with the incurious, early workers and walked briskly toward his own office building.

On the corner of Randolph Street he paused to wipe the cold sweat from his forehead and glance back furtively at the marquee of the Glark Street Hotel. His heart was still beating like a drum. He still had difficulty in breathing. But he was out of it now. Whatever the angle was behind the mad situation in which he had awakened, he, through some freak of luck, had emerged unmarked. Then he thought of his gun.

He turned in at the Sherman Hotel and examined the gun in a stall in the Men's Room. The barrel still smelled of spent powder. One cartridge had been fired. All his scrubbing of fingerprints and sneaking down stairs had been in vain. The dead blond had been killed with his gun. He knew it. And any half smart ballistics man could *prove* it.

As he toweled his hands in the outer room, the colored attendant asked brisk-

ly: "You want to be brushed off, Mister?"

Mercer lighted a cigarette. "It looks like I already have been."

CHAPTER TWO

Prelude to Murder

THE apartment contrasted sharply with the neighborhood. The apartment was pin-point clean. Still fuddled with sleep and somewhat irritated over having been disturbed at that hour of morning, Anthony Garbaldi Wilson Campobasso shook his head emphatically in answer to Mercer's question.

"You crazy, or drunk, or what? You no drunk when you leave-a my place. You only have one drenk."

Mercer clutched the other man by the front of his old-fashioned night shirt. "No one palmed you a fin to slip me knockout drops?"

Tony was insulted, also a little frightened, but he denied the charge.

Mercer persisted: "Who was in the bar while I was there last night?"

Tony's recollection coincided with his own. There had been four men in the bar. One had been Carlson, the young lawyer whose office was on the same floor as his own. Another had been Tom Hooper who once had had a seat on the Grain Exchange, and a saw-toothed youth of thirty whom Tony believed to be Tom Hooper's nephew. The fourth man had been a well-dressed, loud-mouthed stranger. Tony remembered that Mercer's drink had stood waiting on the bar while Mercer phoned his wife. Any of the men could have drugged it. But Mercer knew no reason why they should. He had no quarrel with any of them. Theirs was merely a drinking acquaintance.

"How about when I left?" he asked. "Was anyone waiting in my car?"

The pudgy Italian demanded: "What's a matter, you, Matt? You not? I no got eyes in back my head. I no see you after I cash your check and you-a walk out my door."

His wife shrilled something in Italian from the bedroom. Tony eyed Mercer suspiciously. "That check, she's a good, Mr. Mercer?"

Mercer merely nodded and walked back to his waiting cab. The deeper he probed the affair, the less sense it made. There were a lot of lads around town who had reason to hate his guts. But their idea of getting even wouldn't be to frame him into the chair. And if it had been a murder frame it seemed incredible that he would have been allowed to walk out of the room unmolested. An anonymous phone call to the police would have taken care of that angle.

He gave the number of his office building to the driver. "And stop at the first bar that's open."

Two drinks helped his headache slightly but failed to take the foul taste of chloral from his mouth. He bought a phone slug from the bartender and using his handkerchief to disguise his voice he called the Glark Street Hotel and asked to be connected with 410.

The clerk reported: "I'm sorry. Room 410 does not answer."

Mercer protested: "But Miss Johns is expecting this call. Are you certain that you are ringing Miss John's room?"

There was a brief hesitation at the other end, then the clerk chuckled: "You must have the wrong hotel, Mister. We have a Mr. and Mrs. Smith in Room 410."

Mercer apologized and hung up. It was worth a nickle, but no more, to learn that he had been registered as Smith.

"Smith. Now that's original," he snorted.

For a moment he knew panic as he wondered if he could have gotten boiled after he had left Tony's, picked up the girl somewhere, and taken her to the hotel. Such things had happened in the old days before he had met Sherry. But his memory ended with climbing in his car. And no matter how drunk he might have gotten there would be flashes of the night just past if he had killed the girl.

"I'm in something up to my neck," he decided.

* * *

ON a sudden hunch he paid off his cab. Three blocks from the bar he found a hardware store open and bought a pound of ten-penny nails,

two sheets of emery cloth, and a gallon of white paint. The paint and the tennypenny nails he dropped into the river as he crossed over to the Loop. The emery cloth he put into his pocket. He would gain nothing by disposing of his gun. It was registered at Central Bureau. Its sudden disappearance would be equivalent to a confession. He could, however, add a few gray hairs to the ballistic expert's temples.

The day began like any other. In the elevator riding to his floor, Mercer tried to whip up courage to phone Sherry. He would have to sooner or later.

The shut-up office smelled of stale tobacco. Mercer glanced at his watch. It was exactly nine o'clock. His secretary, when she came to work on time, didn't start until nine thirty. There would be plenty of time for what he had in mind. He closed the door and studied the reverse side of the legend:

MATT MERCER—INVESTIGATIONS

He pondered the sign glumly. There had been the three of them at first—he, and Harry, and Steve. Now Harry and Steve were back in the service, and all that was left was a headache.

He opened the inner office windows and called the Telephone Service Exchange. Sherry had phoned the office six times. Drive-4325 had phoned exactly twenty-two times, starting at seven o'clock the night before and continuing until three o'clock that morning. The number was familiar but he couldn't place it.

He laid his gun on the desk blotter, put the sheets of emery cloth beside it, got out some tools and a can of cleaning oil—then picked up his phone abruptly and called his own home number.

Sherry answered the phone.

"Look, Sherry," he took the plunge before he lost his nerve, "I'm sorry as hell about last night. But I'm in a jam, a bad one."

There was something in his voice that stopped the caustic retort on her tongue. "Oh, Matt! Is it serious?" she asked him.

"It could be," he answered truthfully. "I don't know yet, and I don't want to talk over the phone. I'll be home in about an hour."

She asked if he was at the office and when he told her he was, she said: "Then call Zo Charters before you do anything else. She's been trying to get you all night. She says that it is a matter of life and death, but that's all that she would tell me."

Mercer checked the number with her. It was Drive-4325. It was small wonder it had been familiar. Zo was one of their best friends. He felt sorry as hell for the kid. Her husband, Lieutenant Jack Charters, had been one of the small group of Marines that had been cut off in Shanghai when war had been declared. He hadn't been heard of since.

"I'll call her right away," Mercer promised. He added, his voice growing gruff as it always did when he tried to tell Sherry what she and the twins meant to him: "And you're a damn good scout."

Sherry laughed lightly: "I'm just growing used to you, Sergeant. You see, I know that you can't reform a Marine over night. But Lord help you if I ever catch you with another woman. I *might* let you live, I don't know. But I'd scratch her nasty eyes right out."

Mercer shuddered slightly as he broke the connection. The dead blond girl's eyes had been blue. He dialed Zo Charters' number.

"Oh, Matt. I thought I'd die before I got in touch with you," she told him. She was either laughing or crying hysterically. He couldn't tell which. "You stay right in your office, Matt. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

She hung up before he could question her.

Mercer replaced the receiver and began to clean his gun. He removed the slight powder fouling in the barrel, then rammed the emery cloth through it a dozen times to remove any slight imperfections from the rifling and possibly add fresh scratches to the grooves. Satisfied, he replaced the expended cartridge in the cylinder, sealed the brass case and the sheets of emery cloth in an envelope and addressed the envelope to Henry Jones, General Delivery, New York, stamped it and dropped it in the letter slot out in the hall.

He was, perhaps, being over-cautious. He had learned that it paid. The affair

in Room 410 wasn't over. He doubted if it even had begun.

* * *

BACK in his office, he oiled the gun he had mutilated, laid it in the felt-lined bottom drawer of his desk, and slide his spare gun into his holster. Both were .38s. Both were registered in his name.

The door of his outer office opened and closed and Mercer drew his gun. "Yes—?" he demanded.

A meek voice answered. "Excuse me for bothering you, please. But I wonder if—" The inner office door opened slowly and a cherry-cheeked white-haired man who might have posed for a candid portrait of Santa Claus without his beard, grew wide-eyed at the sight of the gun. "Oh—I didn't know," he temporized. "Excuse me. I—er—I'm the Reverend Damon Marston, and—"

Mercer slid his gun back in its holster but his eyes remained alert. "Yeah? So what?"

The white-haired man gulped: "Well, I've been a missionary in China and Japan for over twenty years," he told Mercer. "And knowing how great China's need really is, I—er—"

Mercer grinned suddenly. "You're soliciting funds for war relief."

The Reverend Damon Marston beamed like a chubby cherub. "Yes. Precisely. My Institute is sponsoring the collection." He offered his credentials timidly.

Mercer waved them aside and took a ten dollar bill from his wallet. "It's a good cause. Sorry I scared you. I thought you were someone else."

Marston peered intently into Mercer's face. "I beg your pardon. But aren't you the Matt Mercer, First Sergeant Matt Mercer of the United States Marines who lost his left arm in 1937 in the Yangtze incident, but not until after you had shot down three Japanese planes?"

Mercer admitted that he was and the white-haired man insisted on shaking his hand. "Oh, we all were so proud of you," he enthused, "even we men of the cloth to whom bloodshed is abhorrent. May God keep you and bless you, Sergeant Mercer."

He toddled from the office after writing a receipt, leaving Mercer red behind the ears, but grinning. Now that the arm he had lost was keeping him out of the big show, it was nice to meet someone who remembered.

He thought of the dead blonde and the grin faded from his face. There was killing as a soldier killed, and there was murder. And murder was a nasty business.

Zo Charters came ten minutes later. Her eyes were puffed from lack of sleep, but she was laughing and not crying. "Jack is alive!" was her greeting.

"Good!" Mercer boomed. "By God, that's news. We'll have a drink on that." He fumbled a bottle of rye from his desk and got two glasses from the cabinet.

He drank, looking at the girl. The strain that had haunted her face for months was gone. She sipped her drink excitedly, opened her mouth to speak, then hesitated.

"There was something you wanted, Zo?" Mercer tried to help her out.

She took a deep breath, and began: "You like me, don't you, Matt? I mean, that is, you and Sherry like me and Jack?"

"You know we do," he told her. "Come on. Get it off your chest, Zo."

"I have to raise five thousand dollars right away," she told him. "I can't tell you why, Matt. But I want you to lend me two thousand dollars."

He frowned. "But you said that you had to raise—"

"The bank will lend me two thousand more on our house. My rings, and the silver, and the furniture, and the car, will bring another thousand on a chattel mortgage. But you'll have to lend me the two thousand, Matt—just on my word."

Mercer mentally totaled his checking account. He could lend her the money without seriously shorting himself, but he had promised Jack to look after his wife's financial affairs when the younger man had been home on his last leave. And allowing Zo to mortgage everything and borrow two thousand on top of that was a serious step.

"Can do?" she demanded, bright-eyed.

"Can do," he told her soberly. He poured himself another drink. "But look

here, Zo. Five grand is a lot of money. What do you want it for?"

She began to cry softly. "Don't ask me, Matt. Just lend it to me, please. When Jack comes home we'll pay back the money. We—"

"To hell with paying back the dough," he stopped her. "I don't give a damn if you never pay me. But I promised Jack that I'd look after you. Zo, are you in a jam?"

She sniffed, her voice very small. "No."

MERCER lighted a cigarette, striking the match on the steel fingers of his left hand. The day was progressing nicely. None of it made any sense. First he woke up in bed with a dead blonde whom he had never seen before, and now his best friend's wife went crazy. He opened his check book, while she watched him through her tears.

He consulted his balance. "You can have all or any part of four thousand, two hundred and forty-three dollars, and twenty-one cents. But you've got to tell

me what you need it for. That's final."

"I can't," she sobbed. "I can't." Then she decided that she could. "You wouldn't tell anyone, Matt? You wouldn't even tell Sherry?"

He promised with a mental reservation.

She took a deep breath and began. "Two days ago the nicest man came to the house. And last night I got a phone call from him—"

Mercer lighted a fresh cigarette and had trouble with the match. "Yes—?"

His eyes intent on the girl's face, he failed to see the office door inch open and a hand thrust itself through the crack holding a heavy gun.

"And the man told me over the phone," Zo Charters continued, "that—"

The report of the gun in the small office almost broke Mercer's ear drums. Zo Charters stood up and screamed. Then the heavy gun blasted again and the force of the slug striking his left arm whirled Mercer around in his chair.

He tugged at his gun as the door slammed shut. He put three shots through

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the glass and raced to the door. It was locked from the other side. By the time he had burst out the glass and turned the key, the man was gone.

Mercer continued to the hall door and wrenched it open. Other doors along the hall opened at the same time and worried heads popped out in the hall.

Jim Carlson, the lawyer, his brief case spilled open on the tile, leaned white-faced against the wall just outside of his office. Blood streamed down his cheek from a nasty cut on his forehead. "He went down the back stairs!" Jim Carlson told Mercer. "A slim, Spanish looking fellow with one of those eyebrow mustaches."

Mercer pounded on down the stairs. They opened into a basement receiving room that in turn led out to Clark Street. There was no sign of the man whom Carlson had described. One of two things could have happened. He could have already mixed with the crowd on Clark Street, or he could have stopped off at any floor, gone through the fire door to the hall, rang for an elevator, and walked out calmly through the lobby.

The big detective retraced his steps. The man had gotten away cleanly. Only one stenographer had even seen him. And she swore that the man looked more Mexican than Spanish and had been shabbily dressed.

The usual curious jammed the hall outside of Mercer's office. A doctor was dressing Carlson's cut. It had been made with a vicious slash of a gun barrel and had laid the flesh open to the bone.

Carlson grinned weakly at Mercer. "I tried to stop him."

Mercer squeezed the lawyer's shoulder. "It was a good try, Jim. And thanks."

He pushed through the crowd into his office. Zo was probably frightened half to death. He stopped short at the sight of Feeny, the building watchman, standing in the doorway of the inner office.

"She's dead," Feeny said bluntly. "I've already phoned for the cops."

"Dead? Who's dead?" Mercer pushed by him.

Zo lay on the rug in front of his desk, all the strain lines washed from her face. She would never be lonely or worried again, or walk the floor for endless nights

waiting for news that did not come. Her scream hadn't been fright, but pain. The first shot had been meant for her. She had died almost instantly. The second shot fired at Mercer must have been an afterthought to gain the killer time.

"Dead? Zo can't be dead," the big man repeated stupidly. He knelt beside the body of the girl who had been so happy only minutes before. She was dead, murdered deliberately to keep her from telling Mercer something that she knew.

CHAPTER THREE

Paging Mr. Smith

INSPECTOR HAIG of Homicide liked Mercer as well as it was in his slightly envenomed nature to like anyone. For thirty years he had dealt almost exclusively with cow-men, heist-artists, box-men, bank robbers, dope fiends, matricides, patricides, fratricides, and homicides. If there was any good in human nature, he seldom saw it. His speech was caustic and to the point.

He indicated Zo. "Who was her boy friend?"

Mercer said: "She didn't have one."

They sat on a window sill of his office watching the tech work and waiting for the coroner's report.

"And she never got to tell you why she wanted the two grand?"

"No," Mercer said.

"You're positive?"

"I'm positive. I thought at the time that the shots were meant for me."

Haig pounced on the remark. "Then someone is gunning for you?"

Mercer thought of the dead blond and winced. "No. Not exactly," he lied.

Haig sent a detective for Carlson.

"Sure I'd know him if I saw him again," the lawyer said. He touched the bandaged wound on his forehead gingerly. "And I owe him plenty for this."

Mercer asked Carlson to repeat his description of the man.

Carlson's description was vividly real. "He had sleek black hair, black eyes, and a thin black mustache. He was a man in his early thirties about five feet seven inches tall and weighing not more than a hundred and thirty pounds. I don't re-

member the color of his suit but I retain an impression that he was well and expensively dressed."

"That mean anything?" Haig asked Mercer.

"Not a damn thing," the former Marine admitted.

The lawyer left with one of Haig's squad to see if he could find a picture of the man in the department's files.

Haig worried his soggy cigar butt from one side of his mouth to the other. "And you say, Mercer, that Mrs. Charters called you twenty-two times last night, but you were out?"

"That's right."

"Where were you?"

"I'd rather not say," Mercer told him.

Haig raised his eyebrows slightly. He nodded at Zo Charters as a pic man snapped the body. "Well, whatever she wanted to tell you was damn important to her. You two weren't playing house?"

Mercer kept his temper with an effort. "We were not. Her husband was a friend of mine."

Haig smiled cynically. "Since when did that make any difference? Repeat your conversation, word for word." When Mercer had finished, he said: "Hm. Two days ago the nicest man came to the house. And last night I got a phone call from him. And the man told me over the phone—' Haig cocked his thumb at the body and fired it. "Then blooey. Just in the slightly shopworn nick of time."

"You can check that phone call?" Mercer asked.

Haig snubbed out his cigar on the sill. "Hell no. They can only do that in detective stories."

The tech squad's report was succinct. There was nothing that they could add to or detract from Mercer's story. Any possible fingerprints in the outer office had been destroyed by the crowd of building workers. Only the one stenographer had seen the slim Spanish-looking man and she still insisted that he was a Mexican and shabbily dressed. The death bullet had been fired from a distance of at least ten feet. The size of the slug pried out of Mercer's left arm could not be determined accurately except in the laboratory but it was believed to be a .44. It would

be compared with the slug in Mrs. Charters' body as soon as an autopsy had been made and the other slug recovered.

The coroner's report was even more succinct. The girl had died almost instantly. The bullet that had killed her had entered her back, shattering a rib. It was still lodged in her body.

Haig got up from the window sill. "You come out to her house with us, Mercer," he ordered. "You may be able to see something that—"

The phone on Mercer's desk rang. It was Haig's office calling. The inspector spoke in grunted monosyllables, then replaced the phone gently in its cradle. "It seems that there's an epidemic of dead girls this morning," he told Mercer quietly. "One of the maids at the Clark Street Hotel just used her pass key on Room 410, and—"

Mercer licked at his lips and tried to smile. "Yes—?"

Haig continued: "It seems that a Mrs. Smith has got herself knocked off, and Mr. Smith is missing. Grab your hat and come along."

Mercer protested, "But—"

"Don't argue with me," Inspector Haig ordered curtly. "We'll go right on out to the Charters' house from there."

* * *

MERCER stood in one corner of the room, trying to make himself small. The room was as he had remembered it. The plaster was patched and cracked. The faded wall paper was stained, and hung from the wall in blisters. The dead girl still lay on the bed.

Haig questioned the maid first. "You found the body?"

"Yes, suh. I bang on the door a little after ten, an' when no one answer I come in."

Haig asked his squad: "Any of you know her?"

Shale, a former member of the Morals Squad, studied the girl's face. "That's Mable Cort. She's been around the Loop for years."

Mercer felt sick to his stomach. His connection with the girl came out, Sherry would divorce him, if she didn't shoot him first. Sherry wasn't red-haired for noth-

ing. She had an Irish temper—and how!
“You anything to add?” Haig asked the maid.

“No, suh,” she shook her head. “I ain’.” She hesitated, added: “‘Ceptin’ that I saw Mr. Smith go out ‘bout seven o’clock this morning. I ask him do he want the room made up, an’ he say no, his wife is sleeping.”

Haig breathed: “Sweetheart. What did this Mr. Smith look like?”

“It dark in the hall,” the maid protested. “I doan see him real good.”

Haig exploded: “But you saw him. Was he a big man or a little man?”

The maid’s eyes sorted through the plainclothes men in the room and stopped on Mercer. “He ‘bout the size of that officer there,” she informed Haig. She added with mounting interest. “He was wearing the same kind of hat and topcoat, too.”

Haig said dryly: “So this is where you were last night. Shame on you, Matt.”

Mercer managed a wry grin. His whole body was wet with sweat. “Yeah. Shame on me,” he agreed. “But for God’s sake, don’t tell Sherry.”

There was a general laugh.

Yates, the coroner, straightened from the figure which he had been examining and went to wash his hands in the bathroom.

“She died about three o’clock this morning, or maybe a little before that,” he called to Haig over the running water. “And she was knocked out with chloral before she was shot.” He emerged, drying his hands on a towel. “Of course I can’t tell until I analyze the contents of her stomach, but I’d say she was given a pretty strong belt of chloral. He pointed to the puckered bullet hole. “I don’t believe that was really necessary.”

Haig sniffed at the bottle of whiskey. “The bottle is loaded with chloral.”

Mercer patted at his forehead with his handkerchief. One point at least was clear. *It hadn’t been meant for him to leave the room. Whoever had attempted to frame him for murder knew that he was a morning drinker. The bottle had been left convenient to his hand. If he had taken even one drink he would have still been on the bed when the maid had discovered the body.*

He watched the proceedings with nervous interest. He had the feeling that he was attending a funeral—his own.

* * *

HAIG demanded to see the night clerk. The clerk said that his name was Ayers. He was a fat youngster with a pasty face and a few scraggly brown hairs combed over the top of his head under an erroneous impression that they concealed the fact that he was prematurely bald.

“You knew her?” Haig demanded.

“I did,” Ayers admitted. “And I was on the desk last night when she checked in.”

“As Mrs. Smith?”

“As Mrs. Smith,” he added. “But I didn’t see Mr. Smith. Mable said that her husband would be in later.”

Haig exploded: “You knew that she wasn’t married. You knew that her name wasn’t Smith.”

The fat clerk giggled nervously. “How could I know that, inspector? Folks get married every day.”

Haig smacked him into a chair. “What time did Smith arrive?”

Ayers turned sullen. “I wouldn’t know. I tell you I didn’t see the guy.”

“He could get into the hotel without coming through the lobby?”

“He could come in through the fire door in the alley. Guys have come in that way.”

Mercer crossed to the window and looked down into the alley. *Another point was clear. He had been carried by at least two men in through the fire door and up the stairs that were almost directly opposite the room.* Such an entrance would have caused no comment. Drunks were common at the Glark Street Hotel.

Haig continued: “And now, about this morning?”

Ayers was suspiciously wary. “Yair?”

“You saw Smith leave?”

“I wouldn’t know. A lot of guys who live here go to work about that time.” He hurried on as Haig doubled a fist to refresh his memory. “I do remember one guy, though. He come down while I was making my seven-thirty calls. He must have walked down the stairs because the

first I see him he's across the lobby and almost out the door."

"And what did he look like?"

Ayers considered. "I guess it must have been the same guy that Louise saw." He pointed at Mercer. "That guy over there."

Mercer said, too hotly: "What the hell—?"

Everyone laughed but Haig.

The clerk apologized, "I mean, the guy who looked like you. All that I saw was his back."

Mercer said: "Okay. Skip it." He wanted to get out of the room. His heart was beginning to pound. He didn't like the way that Haig was staring at him.

Haig didn't. Instead, he called after him: "Okay, sore head. But you stay out of Zo Charters' place until I get there. And if you don't want Sherry to divorce you, you'd better stop going around impersonating Mr. Smith."

Ribald laughter followed Mercer down the stairs. But Mercer wasn't laughing. Haig hadn't fooled him. The caustic little inspector was lancing in the dark, but suspicious. More, in some way the dead blond's death and Zo Charters' murder were connected. How, or what either had to do with him was up to him to figure out—and fast. Once Haig had cracked down on him, it would be too late.

He phoned Sherry from a booth in the

General "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell

needs fighter planes and bombers. You can help him get them—by topping that 10% in War Bonds!

Haig asked, half seriously, "Are you certain that you don't want to tell me where you were last night, Matt?"

The former Marine colored. "It's none of your damn business. You'd suspect your grandmother of murder."

No one was laughing now. Haig hesitated, said: "This is official, Matt. Just where were you last night?"

Mercer thought fast. As yet Haig had no reason to connect him with the room, other than the maid's statement. He was just feeling in the dark. Since he had married Sherry, his love life had been circumspect. "I was home in bed, potzed to the gills," he lied. "Why? Do you want to make something of it?" He pointed to the phone and bluffed: "Go on. Get Sherry on the phone. You know that she won't lie."

Haig tried to mend the breach that he had made. "All right. Don't get so hot about it, Matt."

Mercer chose to stay insulted. "To hell with that stuff. And to hell with you." He stalked stiff-legged from the room expecting Haig to call him back at every step.

bar across the street and asked her to meet him at Zo's bungalow. "And if you love me, hon," he told her, "remember that I was home stinking drunk last night. I didn't leave the house until seven o'clock this morning."

SHERRY was waiting, white-faced, on Zo's porch. "I had hardly hung up the phone when Inspector Haig called me," she told him as she lifted her lips to be kissed. "What is it, Matt?"

"It's murder," he answered grimly.

She swayed slightly in his arms. "Oh, Matt—!"

"Nix. I haven't killed anyone." He forced a grin. "But someone is damned anxious to send me to the chair."

She didn't ask him for details. "You were home last night. You didn't leave the house until seven o'clock this morning."

Mercer kissed her. "Good girl. Now let's get inside. We haven't got much time."

She chased the key through her handbag. "But what is it all about, Matt? Where is Zo?"

"Zo is dead," Mercer told his wife bluntly. "She was murdered in my office less than an hour ago."

Sherry's gloved hand sought her throat. Tears glistened in her eyes. "Oh, Matt! You and Zo—?"

Mercer shook his head. "You and Inspector Haig. Now stop being so damn jealous. I don't even know who killed Zo, or why she was killed, except that someone didn't want her to tell me something."

Sherry protested: "But that doesn't make sense."

"Murder seldom does," he told her.

The drinks were beginning to wear off. His head had begun to ache again. He wished that he was more of a story-book detective. They always seemed to know how to meet everything. But he had built up his agency on brawn and common sense and neither seemed to be of much help right now.

He prowled the rooms of the bungalow uneasily. He didn't even know what he was looking for and admitted as much to Sherry when he asked her to help him. "Whatever it is that I'm looking for," he told her, "I have a hunch, is something concerning Jack. It may be a scrap of paper, a phone number scrawled on a card. Zo wanted to borrow two thousand dollars so she could pay out five thousand."

"Blackmail?"

Mercer shrugged.

The dead woman's desk seemed to hold the greatest promise. Mercer searched it methodically. There were no overdue bills, no clandestine love letters, and no demands for money.

There was a clipping cut from a local paper. It listed the names of the first captured American soldiers to be exchanged for Japanese. Mercer checked it to make certain that Jack's name was not on it. There was also a letter from the Red Cross, who were happy to inform Zo that 1st Lieutenant Jack Charters, U.S.M.C. had been located in a Japanese concentration camp in Kobe.

The bottom drawer of the desk contained the letters that Zo had written her husband daily, but had not been able to mail. Mercer selected one at random and read it. It was a letter of fierce pride

and courage. She would continue to write every day because she knew that he was alive and would want her to. Once the nightmare of war had passed, they would read them together.

Mercer called to Sherry in the bedroom: "You find anything in there?"

She came out crying softly. "Only a letter that Zo started to Jack last night. She read aloud: 'Oh, my darling. I still can't believe that it's true. The darn old happy tears keep spilling all over the paper. Oh, Jack, to think that I'll soon be in your arms again—' Sherry stopped and blew her nose on a wisp of a handkerchief.

Mercer got up from the desk, cursing softly. "I think that I have it," he said. "But I didn't know any guy could be so low."

"Have what?" Sherry demanded.

Mercer took the unfinished letter from her, folded it carefully and put it in his pocket. "The reason that Zo was killed," he said. "It wasn't blackmail. It was a racket."

More than that he refused to say. He closed and locked the door behind them and led the way down stairs. If Haig should arrest him now, it would spoil everything. He had to get out of that neighborhood and back into the Loop. "I'll drop you off at the house," he told Sherry. "Then I have a date to push in a lad's teeth before I turn him over to Haig for murder."

"Who? Who is he?" she demanded.

"I don't know yet," he admitted.

In front of their house he reminded Sherry: "I was home and in bed last night."

"You were home and in bed last night," she repeated. She kissed him soundly. "And you didn't leave the house until after seven this morning. She added: 'But if you ever worry me that way again, Matt Mercer, me not knowing if you are alive or dead, or with some other woman, or—'"

Magnolia hailed them from the porch. "A special Western Union boy just leave this yere for you, Mister Mercer." She waved a brown manila envelope. "He say that it *very* important."

Mercer crossed the lawn with Sherry and took the envelope. Sherry pressed

close to Mercer's shoulder. She was to wish that she hadn't.

The envelope contained a single picture. It had been taken in Room 410 of the Glark Street Hotel before the blond Mable Cort had died. In the picture she was very much alive, and while his face had been turned from the camera, his identity was plain. Mercer's neck turned a deep rich copper. He had seen worse pictures before, but he didn't remember when.

Sherry looked from the picture to her husband's face. "No. Don't even try to explain," she stopped him.

She walked dry-eyed into the house. It was not until after she had slammed the door that Mercer could hear her crying. He continued to stare at the picture. There was no message with it. No message was necessary. The picture said all that was needed. If he persisted in getting in the way of the man or the men who had sent it, the negative of the picture would be mailed to Inspector Haig.

CHAPTER FOUR

Guilty As Hell

THIS was a different Mercer than Al had ever seen before. He seemed older, grayer, harder. He stood tapping the steel fingers of his left hand on the bar and scowling at the headlines. There were pictures of both the dead girls on the front page.

"Boy. That's sure a mess, eh, Mr. Mercer?" Tony's relief bartender offered.

Mercer grunted. He had made up his mind. To hell with the consequences. Unless Haig picked him up first, he meant to feel the throat of the man who had murdered Zo.

The newspapers featured his own name prominently in connection with Zo Charters' death, but as yet no smart reporter had smelled out the link between Zo's death and that of Mable Cort.

Mercer thumbed the folded picture in his pocket. He knew that he ought to destroy it. It was like carrying a pass to the electric chair.

Al tried to be sociable again: "The girl in your office phoned twice, Mr. Mercer. She says that the joint is packed with re-

porters, and they are tired of waiting.

Mercer nodded and ordered another double rye. He didn't intend to go back to his office any sooner than he could help. He had a lot to do and little time in which to do it. He knew, or thought that he knew, the filthy racket that had been behind Zo Charters' death, but he had nothing definite to offer Haig that would absolve him in the death of the blond. He tapped the picture of Mable in the paper. "Did you know this bimbo, Al?"

The bartender towed a glass. "I've seen her around," he admitted. "Her and Jerry got tight as a drum in here one night and Tony had to put them out."

"Jerry?"

"Sure. You know. Mr. Hooper's nephew. That sallow-faced guy about thirty who always comes in here with him. I think they're in business together."

Mercer digested that slowly. It could mean much. It could mean nothing. He took a ten dollar bill from his wallet and slid it across the bar. "That's yours for some information."

Al rolled it into a spill. "Yair? What do you want to know?"

Mercer confided: "Look. If I brought a guy in here, Al, and wanted you to slip him some knock-out drops, how would you go about it?"

The bartender scowled at the bill. "Why, I'd just drop it in his glass whenever the guy wasn't looking, I guess." He added quickly. "Not that I'd ever do such a thing, Mr. Mercer. The only time that we ever slip anyone anything in here is when a guy gets so nasty drunk that we can't handle him otherwise."

"But you do keep a few chloral drops handy?"

"Sure. All bars do. We—" The bartender stopped short as he realized what he had said. "Hey. What the hell. Don't you go telling Tony that I told you. There's some things a guy just doesn't talk about."

Mercer thought of the picture in his pocket. "Yeah. Sure." He finished his drink and walked out of the bar. He knew what he wanted to know. He had been given the works in Tony's. But he doubted that Tony had slipped him

the drops. He was too shrewd a business man.

Hooper's office was large but somehow empty. Mercer pushed by the girl at the gate and walked into Hooper's private office.

Almost as large a man as Mercer, Hooper rose from his desk to face him. He wasn't pleased. "What the hell is the idea, Mercer?"

Mercer said curtly: "Sit down before I slap you down. And call that nephew of yours in here."

Hooper pressed a button on his desk but remained standing. "Are you drunk, or crazy, or what?"

"How's business?" Mercer countered.

"Lousy," the broker admitted. "But I fail to see how my affairs are any of—"

HIS nephew strode into the office and closed the door behind him. "You wanted me?"

"I did," Mercer said. "Look. You two guys were in Tony's while I was in there last night."

"That's right," the younger Hooper admitted. He added, "So what about it?"

Mercer hit him so hard that he bounced off the wall. This was something that he understood. "So either you did it yourself," he said, "or you had Tony slip me knockout drops."

The elder Hooper said: "He's crazy."

"Also damn mad," Mercer admitted. "It's a lousy, filthy, racket that you're running."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Mercer took a newspaper from his pocket and thrust the picture of Mable Cort under the young man's nose. "Why did you kill her, Jerry?"

"I didn't," the young man blustered. "Why, I hardly knew the dame outside of getting drunk with her two or three times."

"But you do admit that you knew her?"

The younger Hooper leered: "Intimately. And probably about fifty other guys can say the same. So what?"

"You killed her," Mercer persisted doggedly.

Jerry Hooper hooted. "Prove it."

Tom Hooper ran his lean and sensitive

fingers through his graying hair. "You're in the wrong pew, Mercer." He tapped the newspaper. "I've read the account of the girl's death. And Jerry *couldn't* have killed her. When we left Tony's last night, shortly after you did, we went straight home to River Forest and didn't come back into town until this morning."

"You can prove that?"

Hooper shook his head. "I don't imagine so. But it's the truth."

Mercer considered briefly. He didn't like the set-up. Men who were guilty of murder usually had what they considered an ironclad alibi. "Then tell me this," he demanded. "When we were in Tony's last night, did you see anyone fooling with my drink?"

Both Hoopers shook their heads. Tom Hooper tried to be friendly. "What's eating you, Matt? Someone roll you last night?"

"You should know what happened to me," Mercer told him grimly.

Jerry Hooper felt his jaw. "Well, don't try to take it out on me. And don't try to build up your reputation by tagging me for murder." He jerked his head at the door. "Get the hell out of here before I phone for the cops."

Mercer doubled his fist, then hesitated. He couldn't afford to tangle with the law on even a simple assault and battery charge. "Okay, I'll scream," he agreed. "Just answer this one question. Do you do your own developing and enlarging?"

Both men looked blank. They either didn't know about the picture or both of them were good actors.

"Skip it," Mercer forestalled Hooper's question. "Maybe I've made a mistake." In the doorway he added grimly, "If I haven't, I'll be back."

He bought a handful of cigars at the counter in the arcade of the building, and considered his next move. He was making no progress, fast. When Steve and Harry had been with him, things had been much simpler. What one man couldn't figure out, the other could. He decided to call on Carlson next.

He reviewed what he knew about the young lawyer. It wasn't much. Carlson had a fair criminal practice. He lived, and dressed, and ate well. He had proven

that he was no coward by attempting to stop the man who had killed Zo. Mercer phoned him from a booth in the arcade.

The lawyer's office girl was sorry, but Mr. Carlson wasn't in. She believed that he was still at Central Bureau going through the files in the rogue's gallery trying to identify the thug who had killed Mrs. Charters.

Mercer walked on out to the curb, and into trouble. He saw the squad car too late. Shale saw him at the same time and opened the door of the car. He wasn't laughing now. "Get in, Matt," he invited. "We've been looking for you."

Mercer thought of the picture in his pocket and rested his right hand on his coat lapel. "What is it, Shale? A pinch?"

The homicide man shook his head. "Not yet. Not unless you try for that gun."

Mercer looked into the car. A riot gun was pointed at his stomach. He took his hand from his lapel.

"That's better," Shale said. "Get in. Haig wants to talk to you again."



HAIG'S office was large and pleasant. But Ayers didn't like it a bit. He sat on a straight back chair with a detective on each side of him who slapped him without heat every time he refused to answer one of Haig's questions.

"Who was Mable's boy friend?" Haig demanded.

The fat clerk writhed in fear. "I don't know," he lied. "She didn't have any special boy friend."

Haig nodded and a detective slapped him just as Mercer and Shale walked in.

Mercer studied the desk clerk with interest. "That's a hell of a way to get your exercise," he told him dryly. "So—?" he demanded of Haig.

The little man studied him thoughtfully. "I like you, Matt," he said. "And I'll give you every break I can if you come clean."

Mercer kept his voice casual with an effort. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You're Mr. Smith," Haig said.

"Who? Me?" Mercer grinned. "You're

nuts, brother. You're nuts as all hell."

"I can't prove it, not yet," Haig admitted. "But I will." He opened a drawer of his desk and laid a .38 Colt on the blotter. "This is your gun, Matt. The one you were carrying last night. One of the boys found it in a drawer in your office."

Mercer studied the gun with interest. "So—?"

Haig broke the gun and squinted down the barrel. "So someone has run emery cloth through it to fuddle up the ballistics report. You wouldn't know about that, Matt?"

Mercer shook his head and Shale doubled up his fists. "Damn you, Mercer," he swore. "I'm getting tired of this run-around. Now either you come clean, or—" He started a vicious swing at Mercer.

The former marine rolled with the punch and brought up his own right fist in a vicious jab that sent Shale reeling across the office. "Or you'll what?" he demanded.

Haig stepped in between them. "Stop it!" he ordered. "Now look. This isn't a pinch, Matt. We haven't enough on you yet. But if you have anything to say, you'd better say it now, or you'll be sorry. Where did you say that you were last night?"

Mercer stayed with his story. "I was home, in bed. I didn't leave the house until after seven this morning."

Haig shook his head. "I stopped at your place after you failed to meet me at the Charters' house and I found Sherry crying her eyes out. She said that you had been out all night with some blonde tramp."

Mercer stared at the floor, heartsick. He didn't blame Sherry. She felt that he had let her down and she didn't give a damn if the whole world went to hell. She wanted him to be hurt as much as he had hurt her.

Haig continued quietly: "Here's our case, Matt. We have two witnesses who can at least partially identify you as Mr. Smith. We found your car on LaSalle Street in back of the hotel ticketed for all-night parking. Mable was killed with a thirty-eight slug and your gun has been tampered with. You acted nervous as hell in that room this morning. Mable

was a blonde. *And your wife swears that you were out all night with some blonde and identified a picture of Mable in the paper as that blonde.*"

Mercer had trouble in finding his voice. "So—?"

"So I'm not arresting you, not yet, Matt," Haig said quietly. "But I probably will before night. So don't try to get out of town or pull a fast one." He paused. "Now, have you anything to say?"

"No," Mercer said unsteadily. "Not a thing."

* * *

HE walked out of the office into the hall. No one tried to stop him. It was ironical, he thought, that he had all the proof that Haig needed in his pocket and the little man didn't know it. Haig was letting him go for two very obvious reasons. One, he was afraid that when her hurt and anger had worn off, Sherry would change her story. *And a man's wife couldn't be forced to testify against him.* Two, Haig was in the dark concerning the motive for the two murders. He was hoping that the big detective in an attempt to save himself might pull a few hidden chestnuts out of the fire. Mercer had no illusions. He was living on borrowed time.

He took an elevator to the Bureau of Identification floor and asked if Carlson was still there. He was, his face and fingers smudged with dust. "He's not in the files," he told Mercer glumly. "I've been through everything, twice."

The lawyer washed his hands, rolled down the sleeves of his shirt and slipped into his coat.

Mercer asked him bluntly if he had seen Tony slip anything into his drink the night before. "I've already asked the Hoopers," he added. "And they say that he didn't, at least they didn't *see* him."

Carlson hesitated. "Well," he said finally, "I wasn't going to say anything about it because I didn't think it mattered, but—"

"Yes—?"

The lawyer changed the subject abruptly. "Look. Are you in a jam of some kind, Matt? I mean, outside of Mrs. Charters being murdered in your office?"

It was Mercer's turn to hesitate. "Yes, I am," he admitted. He took the picture from his pocket and showed it to the lawyer.

Carlson whistled softly. "You're not in a jam. You're in the chair if Haig sees that. What are you going to do?"

"Keep plugging until I'm picked up," Mercer told him. He put the picture back into his pocket.

Carlson said: "Then if I were you, I think that I'd concentrate on the Hoopers. I know that Tom Hooper is almost bankrupt and running a racket of some kind. And while it didn't seem important at the time, I did see the younger Hooper make a pass over your glass."

"You're positive of that?"

"I'd swear to it in court. Don't tell me that you were drugged, that you don't know what happened to you after you left Tony's last night."

"No," Mercer said grimly. "I know." He made an appointment with Carlson to meet him in his office in two hours and strode briskly out to the elevator bank. He had almost everything that he needed to know. All that remained was to clear up a few loose ends before Haig cracked down on him.

The tail that he had expected was waiting. It was Colby, one of the young detectives who had been third-degreed by Ayers in Haig's office. Mercer walked up to him and bummed him for a match. "I'm going lots of places, fast," he told the youth. "So you had better stick close behind me if you don't want to get lost."

"I'll stay with you," the detective grinned. "What's our first stop, Matt?"

Mercer considered a moment, then told him: "The Bible Institute up on Dearborn Street."

Colby gasped: "Have you gone nuts?"

"Hell, no," Mercer told him. "I'm just beginning to smart up."

CHAPTER FIVE

Trapped

DIRECTOR LUNDGREN of the Bible Institutes' foreign missionary branch listened to Mercer's story with interest. "The Reverend Damon Marston? No, I don't recall the

name. Could you tell me more about him?"

Mercer described his caller.

Lundgren asked: "And he didn't tell you what his denomination was, or in what parts of China and Japan he had spent twenty years?"

"He did not."

Lundgren consulted a huge file. "The man sounds like an imposter. I say that for two reasons. One, I am very familiar with the names of most American missionaries who have been in foreign service for that length of time. Two, I know of no denomination who is calling on business men personally in behalf of the Chinese War Relief Fund."

Mercer remembered the receipt that the white-haired little man had given him and fished it from his wallet.

Lundgren merely glanced at it and handed it back to Mercer. "I am afraid that you have been imposed upon. There is no such Society. If I were you, I would report the matter at once to the Better Business Bureau to keep other business men from being victimized."

"Thank you," Mercer said. "I will."

He returned directly to the Bureau of Identification instead. Peters, the officer in charge, told him that Carlson had left.

"I don't want Carlson. I want to look at pictures," Mercer described the Reverend Marston. "What have you in a con-man who might answer that description?"

"It could be Barry Neal, or Joe Phillips, or Mack Otis, or anyone of a half dozen others," Peters told him. He pointed to a file.

Mercer skimmed through the pictures.

The man for whom he was looking was listed as Barry Neal. He had a record that dated back to 1921 when he had been indicted with Tom Hooper for using the mails to defraud in a blue-sky bucket shop racket. Mercer studied the description intently, then looked at the picture. The picture and the description didn't tally.

He went out in the hall and asked Colby: "What do you know about Barry Neal?"

"I know he's a crook," Colby said.

"Where can I find him now?"

Colby shook his head, then hurried

after Mercer who had crossed to the elevator bank and was jabbing a button savagely. "What's it all about, Matt?"

Mercer got into the elevator, blocked the grill gate with one hand and clipped Colby on the button with the other. "Down!" he ordered the startled elevator operator. "And if you let out a yip, I'll bat you."

On the curb in front of the Bureau he stepped into a cab. "Irv's Pawn Shop on North Clark. Fast."

He sat staring glumly at South State Street as the cab got under way. He hoped that he hadn't hit Colby too hard. But for what he intended to do, he couldn't afford to be tailed. . . .

There were two customers in the pawn shop. Irv took a jeweler's glass from his eye and nodded to the back room. "You're hot tamale, Matt," he told him crisply. "What the hell have you done now? A pick-up order just went out on you." He looked at the ring on Mercer's finger. "What do you want, get-a-way dough? How much?"

"I want Barry Neal's address," Mercer told him.

Irv didn't ask foolish questions. He had known Mercer for years. "I should have it," he admitted. "But I don't know if it's up to date. Barry has been riding pretty high. He hasn't hocked anything for months." He left the room and returned with a card in his hand. "According to this, he's in Room 502 of the Glark Street Hotel."

* * *

MERCER smiled grimly and left. He was headed back to the same spot from which he had started that morning. The street was gray with fog and early dusk. A prowling car, headed north, screamed by him without stopping. A bored patrolman shaking a drunk in a doorway, glanced up as he passed, but he either hadn't heard the pick-up order, or he failed to recognize him.

The fire door in the alley was open. Mercer walked cautiously up the stairs to the fifth floor. He encountered no one but a drunken chorus girl who ignored him to shrill down the hall after a maid.

Room 502 was at the far end of the

hall. He knocked on the door and waited. There was movement inside, but no answer. He knocked again, then turned the knob. The door was locked. He sorted a skeleton key from his key ring and inserted it in the lock, drew his gun and opened the door.

The shade was drawn. The room was dark. Mercer addressed a darker patch of black against the wall. "Take it easy, Neal. I don't want to hurt you. *I want the lad who—*"

The sound that he had heard outside the door began again. It sounded strangely like the creaking of a rope and came from the dark patch on the wall. Mercer closed the door behind him and turned on the light.

He feared that he had come too late. The white-haired man who had called himself the Reverend Damon Marston was hanging from a joint of an old fashioned exposed steam pipe by a length of new manila rope. An overturned chair lay on the floor. The figure was still struggling feebly.

Mercer dropped his gun in its holster and cut the man down from the pipe with his knife. "You damn fool," he cursed him, "Don't you dare to die."

He loosened the rope from Neal's neck and laid him on the bed. He lay there, gasping for breath, his heart still beating faintly. Mercer strode across the room and into the unlighted bathroom for water.

Mercer more sensed than saw the second man. Mercer's hand streaked for his gun—too late. A sap swished through the dark and caught him across the temple. Mercer sank to his knees and caught at the other man's legs. Neither man dared to cry out.

They wrestled and tugged and grunted in silence in the narrow confines of the bathroom. Then the searching sap landed in back of Mercer's ear and the legs that he was clutching seemed to dissolve into air. By an almost superhuman effort he caught at the edge of the basin and pulled himself to his feet only to have the sap land again. The room exploded into light and sound—then grew still and dark.

Mercer had no way of knowing how long he had been unconscious. He pulled himself to his feet, lighted the bathroom

light, and stared at himself in the mirror. The whole left side of his face was matted with clotted blood. One thing was clear. It hadn't been meant that he should awaken. The killer had left him for dead. He tried to wash the clotted blood away and the wounds began to bleed again. He pressed a towel against them and went out into the other room.

The whole room was disordered. A lamp and a desk were tipped over to simulate a struggle. Barry Neal was dead but the rope had disappeared. His face was mashed in now and a towel was knotted tightly around his scrawny throat.

Mercer went back into the bathroom and was sick. Death was nothing new, but he was playing far out of his class. A criminal genius had blocked him at every move. Now the man was growing frightened. He was removing every witness, every scrap of evidence.

Mercer thought suddenly of Sherry. For all he knew, she, too, might well be on the killer's round-robin of murder. Zo had phoned Sherry the night before. There was no way that the killer could know how much or how little Zo had confided in Sherry. The fact that she had phoned had been reported in the paper. And nervous men, in the shadow of the chair, imagined many things.

The big man staggered towards the door, stopped at the sound of voices and feet scuffing down the hall.

"If you're lying, God help you," Shale said, down the hall.

Ayers' voice was a treble whimper. "I'm not lying. Barry will kill me for this."

"And Mable was his girl?"

"For years. But he was tired of her. He was running around with a little brunette and I heard Mable tell him that if she ever caught them together, she'd cut his heart out."

NOW the voices were almost at the door. Mercer felt for his gun. It was still in his holster. He drew it and flattened himself against the wall behind the door just as a fist heavy with authority thudded on the panel. "Open up, Barry. This is Shale, of Homicide."

There was a moment of silence. A third

voice suggested: "Maybe it isn't locked." The door knob turned and the door opened into the room, covering Mercer partly.

Shale stood staring at Barry Neal. "It looks like we're too late."

The three men came into the room and Shale kneeled down beside the body. His fellow officer picked up the phone and ordered the fat clerk to stop blubbering. Mercer inched his key ring from his pocket and slipped the skeleton key into the lock as silently as he could.

Shale heard the clink of metal and turned his head. "Good Lord, it's Mercer!" he bellowed.

Mercer broke from his cover behind the door into the hall, slamming and locking the door behind him while the two homicide men's .38's pricked a pattern of death in the panels. The locked door wouldn't hold them long. He raced down the hall for the stairway as Shale shouted out of the window of the room in which he had been locked: "Mack! Jerry! Cover the front and back! Mercer is in the hotel! He's just killed Barry Neal!"

Police whistles began to shrill on the street below. Mercer had reached the second floor when he heard the fire door bang open. He retraced his steps to the third floor but Shale was out of Neal's room by now. Mercer was caught between the two groups. Both would shoot him on sight.

The drunken chorus girl was still standing in her doorway. "Thish is a hell of a hotel," she told Mercer. "There's always somethin' goin' on. There's always copsh all over the place."

"Yeah, sure," Mercer humored her. He took her by an elbow, guided her back into her room and closed and locked the door just as Shale pounded down the stairs.

"Now wait a minute, Mister. Do I know you?" the girl demanded in drunken disapproval.

Mercer stood listening to the sounds out in the hall. "Sure," he lied. "Don't you remember me?" He saw a wilted gardenia in the basket. "I'm the guy who bought you the gardenia downstairs in the bar last night."

Her disapproval vanished. "Ish tha's so. Well, why don't we have a drink

sent up? Have a lot of drinks sent up?"

Mercer continued to stand at the door. "Why don't we? You call room service and tell them to send up a bottle."

The girl staggered to the phone. Outside the door, Shale bellowed: "Everyone stay in their rooms and no one will get hurt. This is the law, but it isn't a raid. There's a killer in the building."

The girl dropped the phone and screamed: "That's you! I've got a killer in my room." She screamed as loud as she could. "Help! Police! He's killing me!"

Mercer raced by her to the window as a shoulder thudded against the door. He broke the glass with his artificial hand and crawled out on the fire escape.

He was already on the counterweighted ladder when Shale bellowed from the window: "Below there. He's coming down!"

The shout and the squeak of the descending ladder came simultaneously. The uniformed patrolman guarding the fire door flipped a shot at the shadowy figure on the steel.

It missed Mercer by a foot. But Shale was shooting now. A slug tore through the brim of Mercer's hat and burned down across his cheek. He fired a burst of four at the edge of the window to drive Shale back, then let two fly at the pavement of the alley. The uniformed policeman ducked inside the fire door. Then Mercer was in the alley and running. Lead poured from the third-floor window and the fire door as he burst through the mouth of the alley onto La-Salle Street.

A Checker Cab was waiting on the corner for the light to change. Mercer opened the door and got in. "Right on through the light!" he ordered.

The driver turned to protest, saw the barrel of the empty Colt only inches from his head, and the cab leaped the crossing like a startled fawn.

CHAPTER SIX

Interrupted Rendezvous

DEEP night had fallen now. It was ten after eight by Mercer's watch. He limped along warily in the shadows of the trees that lined the street

until he reached his block. Then he took to the lawns.

Haig would expect him to try and contact Sherry exactly as he was doing. Still there was nothing else that he could do. She was next on a mad man's list. He had tried to call her for an hour. Sherry's phone had been constantly busy. It might well be a police trap. He had no way of knowing.

He cut across lawns silently. This was old stuff to him. He had learned this trade in China, Nicaragua, and the Philippines. His eyes, accustomed to the dark, could see the police car parked at the opposite curb in front of his home. There was a light in the living room and one in the children's room, but the shades of both rooms were drawn. He let himself into the basement.

He doubted if there would be a stake-out in the house. Sherry was angry, but she was loyal. In either case, she wouldn't want the twins to know. He tip-toed across the basement to the stairs and up them to the kitchen. There he stood listening.

On the upper floor, Magnolia was telling the twins a story as she prepared them for bed. He waited in an agony of indecision as the bed-time story dragged on. Then the upper floor lights snapped out and Magnolia came clumping down the stairs.

The colored woman stared at him as if he had been a ghost. He put a finger to his lips and whispered: "Where's Sherry?"

The maid's face turned gray with sudden fear. "She went to meet you, Mister Mercer. She cry all afternoon acause she tell the police that you weren't home last night after she find out what a mess you in. That's why when the man call up and say you are hiding at his place and want her to come to see you, that—"

"What man?" Mercer demanded.

"His name Cooper, or Hooper, or something like that." She began to cry.

"Shut up!" Mercer stopped her savagely. "Where was she to meet this Hooper?"

Magnolia wiped her eyes with the fringe of her apron and began to search the telephone stand. "She write the number down somewhere but she so excited

that she forget to take it. I find it after she gone." She found the paper and handed it to Mercer. It read:

*Jerry Hooper
1625 River Road
River Forest, Ill.*

Mercer considered the matter of transportation. "How long has she been gone?"

"'Bout fifteen, twenty minutes," Magnolia told him. "She take a shopping bag jist like she goin' to the store so the police don't try to follow. She say she get a cab down in the shopping district."

Mercer opened the back door, fired six shots at the moon, then raced through the house to the front. The men who had been in the car crossed the street. Two of them ran to the rear.

The third pounded on the door. "What the hell were those shots?"

Mercer yanked open the door. "Grem-lins." He slugged the detective with his fist before the man could trigger his gun, and ran down the stairs and across the lawn to the squad car.

One of the tricked men saw him and shouted: "It's Mercer! He's heading for the car!"

The night came alive with gun lead that raked at the side of the car. Mercer ground on the starter and pulled from the curb in second. As he roared by the house and the slugged man on the porch came to and frosted the windshield with sudden death.

The glass was supposed to be bullet-proof. It wasn't. Crouched low behind the wheel, Mercer could feel the slugs cut through his hair like things alive. Then he was out of pistol range; careening the big car around corners on two wheels, and weaving through traffic like a mad man. He opened the siren and let it wail. He wasn't far behind Sherry, but minutes, even seconds might count. *She was keeping a rendezvous with death.*

THE house was old and set back from the road in a great clump of ancient oak trees. Dry leaves rustled on the neglected lawn. Sherry Mercer had walked the last two blocks, her heart beating like a trip-hammer. Now

she stood peering at the house from the gateway. She hesitated, walked through, and a man stepped from the shadows to meet her.

"Mrs. Mercer?" he demanded in a whisper.

She fought a desire to scream. "Yes. I'm Mrs. Mercer," she admitted. "Matt is here?"

The man took her elbow firmly. "Yes," he lied convincingly. "He's hiding in a little guest house on the river. If you'll please come this way."

Numb with terror and fear, she allowed him to lead her through the trees just as Mercer roared up the drive and braked his stolen car in front of the big house.

Tom Hooper got up from his chair, scattering papers and ashes. "What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded as Mercer strode into the living room.

"Where is she?" Mercer demanded. "Where is Sherry?"

Jerry Hooper came into the room through a rear door. "This is *too* much," he told Mercer. "You may be a big shot in town but you are a little frog out here and I'm going to beat your head off."

The French doors to the side-porch opened and Inspector Haig walked into the room. His squad stood alert behind him. "Never mind, Hooper," Haig said. "You are all under arrest."

"You had a bug on our phone," Mercer gasped.

"That's right," Haig said calmly. "And as soon as Mrs. Mercer gets here, we'll *all* start back for town." He took a brown manila envelope, identical to the one Mercer had received, from his pocket. "I have all of the proof that I need now, Matt. But what the hell is it all about? Why did you kill the blond? Why did you kill Barry Neal?" He turned to the two Hoopers. "What kind of a racket are you guys running anyhow?"

"They aren't," Mercer gasped. "They are being framed the same as I was." He crossed the room to the elder Hooper. "Is there a boat house, or a guest cottage on the grounds where a woman might be hidden?"

"There's a guest cottage," Hooper admitted.

"Search it," Mercer begged Haig. "Sherry should be here by now. The man is mad. He's going to kill her!"

Haig said: "Nuts!" succinctly. "You've come to the end of your rope, Matt. Don't try to palm all this off on anybody else. *You're going to the chair!*"

Sherry's scream came clear and sharp on the frosty night air. Mercer bolted across the room and out through the open door before Haig could level his gun.

"Get him!" the inspector bellowed.

It was easier said than done. By the

MY, YOUR
TECHNIQUE'S
SMOOTH!

SO'S MY CHEEK-
THANKS TO KEEN
STAR BLADES!



4 for 10¢



time they were outside, the big man was ziz-zagging through the trees.

Inside the guest house, Sherry screamed again in terror as the unsmiling man circled the table, reaching for her, a knife in his hand. "Matt!" she screamed. "He's mad! He's going to kill me!"

Mercer burst panting through the door. "The hell he is, honey!" he told her.

Carlson threw away his knife with an oath and drew a gun.

"That won't do you a damn bit of good," Mercer panted. "I'm going to make you eat that!" He stalked slowly across the room, his fingers flexing.

It was the lawyer who screamed now—in fear. He emptied his gun. But Mercer didn't stop until his fingers found Carlson's throat. "When you get to hell," he told him, "send word up to Zo that I sent you!"

The lawyer, sobbing with pain and terror, beat at Mercer's head with the butt of the empty gun. His blows grew less and less frenzied, then his limp arm sunk to his side, and he toppled with Mercer to the floor.

* * *

MERCER'S first conscious thought was that he was dead. Then he saw it was Sherry, not Zo, who smiled at him through eyes misted with tears. He tried to sit up, and did. He was on the floor of the guest house.

The police surgeon rolled down his sleeves. "See? What did I tell you?" he asked Haig. "You can't kill a former Marine. He could drink a quart of rye right now and all he'd do is leak a little."

Haig squatted down beside Mercer. Shale confided to intimates later that it was the first time that he had ever seen the little man smile. "Easy makes it, Matt," Haig smiled. "If you'd have kicked off without clearing up this case—"

Sherry demanded indignantly, resting Matt's head on her shoulder: "You'd have done what?"

"I'd have arrested his corpse for obstructing justice," Haig said dryly. He waved a hand at a sheet-covered object in one corner of the room. "How did Carlson get into this, Matt?" He hesitated, added: "Was he mad?"

"Mad for money," Mercer told him.

He spoke slowly, with an effort. "It has been Carlson right from the start, but I was too dumb to see it. I really didn't get wise to him until he tried to pin the blame on the Hoopers after I had shown him the picture and told him I was going ahead. He had hoped that the picture would stop me. After that, he had to act fast."

He paused for breath, continued: "You see Carlson had a racket that was bigger than he was. He thought that he had it by the tail but it turned around and clawed him *because he didn't know that Zo Charters was a friend of mine.*"

Sherry glanced at the reporters who had sprung from nowhere. "A friend of *ours*," she corrected.

Mercer continued: "Even at the end he didn't have the guts to face the music. He tried to blame Sherry's death onto the Hoopers to confuse the issue and put him entirely in the clear."

Tom Hooper shook his head. "I still don't get it, Matt."

Mercer said: "At the end, Carlson was too spread out. He was trying to cover too many angles. It began with Zo. He knew that I'd smell a rat the minute she told me her story. But he didn't want to kill her. He wanted that five grand. That's why they framed me at the Clark Street Hotel with that blonde. It was Carlson who dropped the chloral in my drink after Zo had told him that she was coming to me to borrow money. He played that angle two ways. If the body was discovered before I came to—fine. If it wasn't, he had the picture that he could hold over my head."

"Go on," Craig said.

Mercer continued: "Why they killed Mable, I don't know. Maybe she wanted too big a cut. Maybe they thought she might squeal. I did hear that desk clerk say that Barry was tired of her."

Shale nodded. "That's right. He did."

"Anyway," Mercer explained, "when I showed at my office that morning, it put Carlson in a spot. He knew that Zo would contact me. So he had Barry waiting for her in his missionary clothes. Slim, dark, Spaniard, hell! Barry Neal shot Zo, then clipped across the hall and into Carlson's office after batting him one with the gun to make Carlson's story

look good."

The police surgeon gave him a sip of water. Mercer rinsed out his mouth, went on: "Then Carlson began to have nerves. He was afraid I might check the rogue-gallery files for the Spaniard and stumble across Neal's picture. So he simply beat me to it. He ripped Neal's picture from the files and pasted in some other crook who answered the same general description. But that was what gave him away. He was becoming too damn careful. He was trying to cover too much."

Haig said: "I see. Then he got to worrying about Barry."

Mercer nodded. "The little con man could have sent him to the chair, and he knew it. You were getting too close. Mable had been Barry's girl. One thing would lead to another. So—"

"He killed him."

Mercer nodded. "He planned to make it look like suicide. But I walked in on the job before he could get away. So he slugged me and left me for dead." He touched his battered face gingerly. "Only my head was too thick."

"And then—?" Shale asked.

"That's all," Mercer said, "except that Carlson knew Zo had talked to Sherry and he was afraid of what might have been said. So he figured one last clever murder. Tom Hooper had been involved with Barry Neal years ago. Both of the Hoopers had been in Tony's when I was drugged. So, Carlson reasoned that if he knocked Sherry off in the Hooper's guest house and anyone went to the chair, it would be the two Hoopers and not him."

The broker cleared his throat. "Er—remind me to buy you a drink, Matt."

"Hell," Jerry Hooper grinned. "I'll get you drunk."

Sherry Mercer's eyes flashed fire. "You will not."

A sudden silence fell on the group in the guest house. Inspector Haig cleared his throat. "But what was Carlson's racket, Matt? How did he stand to gain?"

Mercer told him: "Barry Neal posed as a missionary who had served for years in China and Japan. Carlson had a list of our boys who had been captured. Between them they convinced women like Zo, and mothers, and other wives whose sons and husbands were prisoners of war that they could, due to the Reverend Damon Marston's influential friends in Japan and China, have their sons and husbands put on the list of the next prisoners of war to be exchanged. Hell. Any woman in love with her husband, or any mother or any father with a boy in a Jap prison camp would be glad to pay five thousands bucks to get their boy back even if they had to go out and borrow the money like Zo did."

Haig had difficulty in keeping from booting the corpse. "And Carlson committed three murders and tried to pin you in the chair for a lousy five thousand bucks?"

"From one woman," Mercer said grimly. "We have about thirty thousand boys, counting those who were on Bataan, and Corregidor, and Guam, in Jap concentration camps. Multiply that by five thousand and you have a thirty million dollar racket."

The police surgeon put his hand on Mercer's shoulder. "You've talked enough now, Matt. Even you aren't made of iron. Now take it easy. Rest."

"Please, doctor," Sherry begged. "Just one question."

"Just one more," he agreed.

"Matt—?" Sherry hesitated.

"Yes—?"

She took the folded picture that was showing in his pocket and tore it in small shreds. "Please, Matt. Tell me the truth. After you left Tony's . . . are—well—are you *positive* that you were unconscious *all* the time? Every single minute, darling?"

The big man encircled her in his arms and pulled her lips to his. "What do you think?" he grinned.

"I think you're wonderful," she told him.

THE END

THE CHRISTMAS PRESENT WITH A FUTURE—
A WAR BOND

DEATH'S DOUBLE-ENTRY

The money package broke
in the scuffle.

by
**HENRY
LYSING**



Willie was a book-keeper who never made a mistake—until he tried to make as much in a minute as he might have made in a lifetime. Then Death stopped in to balance the books.

THE germ of the idea was born in Willie Needham that Friday morning when he turned from his ledgers and, through the window, saw Vic Stapleton come across the street to the four-story building which housed the Universal Tobacco Company office.

Stapleton carried a small, black leather bag—carelessly as if its contents were of no special value. What it actually contained was \$18,000, the payroll for the

employees of the Universal Tobacco Company. Stapleton was the assistant cashier. He got the money from the bank every week.

Willie Needham turned back to his ledgers. He had worked for the Universal Tobacco Company for more than nine years. He was paid \$27.50 each week and was given two-weeks vacation with pay every year. He was an efficient book-keeper and could probably remain with the

firm a good many more years and his salary would no doubt be raised from time to time so that he would eventually receive as much as \$32.50 a week, perhaps even \$35.00.

Had Willie not shown up for work some day the executives might have noticed the empty desk, but wouldn't have really known who was missing. Willie's fellow workers left him pretty much alone. The office boys treated him with contempt. The girls in the office—they didn't know that Willie existed.

Yet Willie Needham was not at all the sort of man that folks thought him to be. Willie had the soul of an adventurer, the daring of a freebooter. In his mind he thought daring things, and his washed-out blue eyes looked at women with lust.

But Willie's long years of patient, methodical work were a check-rein on his natural instincts. So when The Idea came to him he thought it out from all angles.

He first did a bit of arithmetic. Twenty-seven dollars and fifty cents a week amount to \$1430. a year. In slightly over twelve years he could earn \$18,000. But he could never have that much money at one time during those same twelve years. Even if he gave up all his small pleasures and little vices, he could not save over \$7.50 a week.

Willie never got to the point of figuring how many years it would take for him to save \$18,000 at the rate of \$7.50 a week. When he got to that point he knew that The Idea was his destiny.

Willie went up to Stamford, Connecticut one week-end and rented a postoffice box. The following week he sent off to a mail-order company for an automatic, complete with one box of cartridges. The next week-end he went up to Stamford again and walked six times around the block which contained the postoffice before he could muster up courage to go in and get his gun.

In his own room back in the city he sliced open the mattress of his bed, buried the gun and cartridges in it, then sewed it up again. Then he gave his full attention to the other necessary details of The Idea.

He watched Vic Stapleton three Fridays in a row. Always Vic parked the car across the street within a minute or two of eleven o'clock, then came across to the tobacco company building.

The fourth Friday Willie made it a point to be out in the corridor when Stapleton came into the building. The assistant cashier passed him on the stairs, said a casual "Hello" and continued up. Had Willie brought his gun with him he could have stuck it into Stapleton's stomach, snatched the leather bag and run.

But that would have meant recognition, a hue and cry, pursuit. Willie wanted none of these things; not when a bit of patience and planning could eliminate them. During his lunch periods he scouted the neighborhood. Just around the corner from the Universal Tobacco Company building was a parcel post mail box. It would readily take a package four inches thick and a foot long.

Willie cut up strips of glossy magazine paper into pieces the size of currency. He made a bundle of them four inches thick, a foot wide, took it to the postoffice and had it weighed. Then he bought postage stamps and carried them in the stamp compartment of his wallet. One lunch hour he typed out two address labels, one reading: "To Roderick Hawley, General Delivery, San Francisco" and the other: "From William Needham, 756 West 110th St. New York City." He put the labels with the stamps in his wallet.

At least a dozen times Willie paced the distance to the mail box around the corner. He timed himself walking at a brisk pace, and the time never varied more than three seconds.

He planned all these things and many others. It took him three months. And then The Day came.

He had drawn his life's savings from the bank and had in his wallet \$240.00. His vacation was scheduled to start on the following Monday. He had only to get through this Friday, the next morning, and then—then he would be off for San Francisco. Life with a capital L!

* * *

WILLIE worked at his ledgers that morning; to the employees around him he looked no different than always. But Willie was different today. He looked at the clock every few minutes, something he had never done before. The office manager did not like clock

watchers, and Willie was a dutiful worker.

At two minutes to eleven Willie climbed down from his high stool, stretched, and walked leisurely in the direction of the men's washroom. He did not go into the washroom however. He slipped out of the door six feet to the right. There was nothing unusual about that. Employees had occasion now and then to go to a department on another floor.

He closed the office door softly, as was his wont. But in the corridor he moved with an alacrity to a long radiator and whisked from behind it a linen duster which he had bought in one of his week-end trips to Stamford. Quickly he donned it. It covered him from throat to ankles. He reached behind the radiator once more, brought out a shapeless cloth cap, a black mask that covered his entire face, a pair of cheap work gloves, and the automatic. He had scarcely adjusted the mask when he heard the door on the first floor open.

Suddenly all of Willie Needham's rehearsed calmness left him. He began shaking like a leaf in a gale. All his instinct screamed to him to turn and run madly up the stairs before Vic Stapleton saw him.

He tried to turn and found that he was paralyzed with fear. He couldn't move a single inch. And then Vic Stapleton rounded the turn of the stairs and almost ran into Willie's automatic. Vic uttered a startled exclamation and recoiled. He was carrying the small bag in his right hand.

Without any will or desire on Willie's part, the automatic in his hand blazed out a shot. A black hole appeared in the assistant cashier's forehead. He began falling, crumpling down. And then Willie's paralysis left him as suddenly as it had come upon him. His brain worked faster than it had ever worked in his life. His own safety was at stake now. He hadn't counted on shooting Stapleton. But it had happened, and Willie had to go through with things. He had planned well these past three months, and even though an incidental murder had been tossed into the scheme of things it shouldn't alter his plans materially.

He lunged out and snatched the bag from Stapleton's already lifeless hand. He shrugged out of the linen duster. He

stuck the gun and cap into it, rolled them up quickly and thrust the bundle and the gloves behind the radiator. The bag—he had made sure long ago that it wasn't locked—he ripped open. There were stacks of paper currency in it; rolls of silver. He ignored the silver, but scooped out the currency.

He did all this as he walked rapidly down the stairs to the street door. He whisked out a folded paper bag from his coat pocket, dumped the money in it and from another pocket brought out strong wrapping paper, already creased and cut to proper size.

By the time he reached the outside door he had already rolled the money into the wrapping paper. He stuck the package under his arm, opened the door, and stepped out to the street.

He walked at a brisk pace. To run might attract attention. With studied carelessness he pulled the heavy cord from his pocket, twisted it around the package and knotted it. He brought out his wallet, affixed the address labels to the package.

Then he rounded the corner and almost dropped in his tracks. A half block away stood the parcel post mail box and six feet from it, idly twirling his stick, was a policeman.

Willie fought the fear that gripped at his vitals. He forced himself to continue walking toward the mail box. He even essayed whistling a tune, but his lips were dry and no sound came from them.

And then, the policeman turned his back on Willie Needham and sauntered off. Willie's knees suddenly felt rubbery and he knew that a film of perspiration had broken out on his forehead.

The cop never looked back. Willie walked to the mail box, dropped the package into the chute and continued on. At the corner he almost caught up with the cop. Almost, but not quite. The policeman continued across the street and Willie turned the corner. He walked briskly toward the Universal Tobacco Company building, finishing a complete circuit of the block.

He rounded the last corner and came upon a group of chattering, excited men and women, employees of the tobacco company. The scene was one of confusion.

No one noticed Willie. No one even

seemed to know that he had just come around the corner. Those who saw him at all thought he had poured out of the building with the rest of them when the hysterical girl who had gone out into the hallway after hearing the dull explosion, had dashed back into the office screaming "Murder!"

Police-car sirens split the air. An ambulance came and there was a frantic milling around of policemen, internes, detectives. It was fifteen minutes before the distracted office manager ordered the employees back to their work.

And Willie Needham went back to his high stool and his ledgers.

* * *

AT NOON he went out with the other employees and had lunch. When they came back the report buzzed through the office that the police had found the murderer's gun, along with a cap, linen duster, and gloves, stuck behind a radiator. There was some talk about the thing being an inside job. A stenographer in the billing department shattered that, however.

She claimed she had seen a black touring car with side curtains pull up behind Stapleton's car across the street. A young clerk in the order department supplemented this story by saying he had been looking out of the window and had seen two men wearing linen dusters climb out of the car and follow Vic across the street.

Police came and went all afternoon. There were conferences with executives, department heads. Willie Needham continued with his bookkeeping.

The following morning there were still two policemen in the office. A new payroll had been brought to the plant under heavy guard and Willie received his salary, plus his two weeks additional vacation money. A few minutes before noon the head bookkeeper came to him and said:

"Have a good time on your vacation, Willie. It only comes once a year you know, ha-ha."

"Thank you, Mr. Meadows," Willie replied with the proper civility due his immediate superior.

"Going to leave town?" pursued the

head bookkeeper in his expressionless tone.

A cold feather slithered up Willie's spine. But then he realized the question was a natural one. Most people do leave the city on their vacations.

"Yes," he said, "I'm planning on going to the Poconos."

"Good, get in some swimming and have some fun. You know—plenty of girls go up there. Ha-ha!"

Willie thought: "If the old coot only knew!—Willie Needham the mouse-bookkeeper, the man even the office boys kidded, a man who had planned a perfect crime, who had killed without a qualm—and gotten away with it!"

Willie rode to his rooming house on the street car. He already had his two suitcases packed. He'd just change his business suit for a light tan gabardine, then call a cab and be off . . . for San Francisco and Life!

He transferred his wallet and some letters and things to the gabardine, then took a last look around the room.

And then someone knocked on the door. The sweat broke out on his forehead. They couldn't—couldn't have got on his trail. Not now, when there were only minutes between him and freedom—

Willie opened the door. A tall, well-built man with a cigar in his mouth stood in the doorway. He was a detective, of course. Willie knew that before the man even showed his badge.

"Lieutenant Stapleton of Headquarters," the policeman introduced himself.

"Stapleton!" Willie said and gagged.

"Yeah, Stapleton." The detective came into the room. "The boy who was killed at your place was my kid brother. I asked to be assigned to the case."

Willie looked into the detective's granite face and a slight tremor ran through him. He'd expected a routine police investigation—but he hadn't counted on a quiz by a man made merciless by a personal interest in the case. Still—the lieutenant couldn't really know anything.

Willie said with proper feeling:

"Vic was a fine chap. That—that was horrible about him. If there's anything I can do—"

Lieutenant Stapleton said, "I'm making a routine investigation. I've a theory that someone employed by the Universal To-

bacco Company killed Vic. I got a list of the employees from your office this morning and inasmuch as there was a notation after your name that you were going on a two-weeks vacation I came to get your fingerprints first."

"My fingerprints!" exclaimed Willie. "Why—I heard around the office that there were no fingerprints on the gun."

Lieutenant Stapleton calmly pulled a card from his pocket. On it was a black fingerprint, a photograph of the original. "The rumor mongers had it partly correct," he said. "There were no fingerprints on the gun. The murderer was smart. But not quite smart enough. You see—he overlooked the cartridges and they were smeared with a nice layer of cosmoline. Here's a beauty of a print we got off one of them."

A red ball of fire seemed to explode in Willie Needham's brain. After all his planning, he had overlooked one tiny detail. That bit of oversight was costing him his freedom—his life!

He stared aghast at the detective. The latter reached into his pocket and pulled out an ink pad and paper. "Just a formality, you understand."

Willie gulped, "Of course. I have no objection."

He turned to the table where the detective had set the pad and paper. He scarcely saw them. What he saw was a chair and electric switches.

"Just roll your finger tips on the pad," the detective instructed. He reached out to take hold of Willie's right hand and help him with the inking.

The touch of the cool fingers was like the sear of a red hot poker. Willie's mind was a turmoil. Wildly he thought of jerking his hands away from the detective's grip and smashing them into the lawman's face. But Stapleton's grasp was strong enough to overpower the slight urge that Willie's mixed up mind had permitted his muscles.

And then Willie's fingertips were on the ink pad . . . they were being rolled smoothly over the paper.

That one moment was enough for Willie to make up his mind. Of course, this was just routine. After all, what if the prints did match? Wasn't the science of fingerprinting somewhat complicated? Certain-

ly this detective wouldn't match the prints right here and now. Maybe even if they looked alike, he would have to get an expert's testimony before he was sure. And perhaps he'd just stick the prints in his pocket and take them down to headquarters, to be checked later. Willie would give an address where he could be reached while on vacation, and that would settle that. Let Stapleton look for him at the vacation resort; Willie would be in San Francisco, enjoying his fortune!



NOW Stapleton let go of one hand and started reaching for the other. Willie's calmness had returned. He knew just what to do now. Talk to the detective. Act at ease. Be friendly; be willing to do anything at all to catch the criminal.

Willie said, "I wish I could do something to help find that killer. Maybe I ought to wait a day or two before I go on my vacation. Perhaps I better wait until these prints are checked at headquarters."

"No, I guess we won't have to ask you to do that. I can check on these prints myself, roughly, right here, although a fingerprint man will go over them, just to be sure. But we don't want to inconvenience anyone too much. You just let us know where you are, and we'll get in touch with you if we need you."

Willie thought: "If he's going to check the prints here, he might see enough similarity to question them. But if I keep his mind occupied, maybe he'll skip over them lightly."

Willie talked. He asked Stapleton questions which showed sympathy in the crime, but no special interest. And it worked. Five minutes went by, then another five. Stapleton had looked at the prints; had compared them with the one taken from the cartridge, and a crease showed on his forehead. But just then Willie asked him a question, and the paper with his prints, along with the print from the cartridge, went into Stapleton's pocket.

Now the detective made a move as if to go, but Willie talked some more. He wanted to do this right; he wanted to be sure that there would be no suspicion of him too soon.

Then there was a resounding knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Willie's voice was firm. He didn't expect any callers, but it would make no difference.

"It's just me, Mrs. Mulloney, Mr. Needham. Here's a package what the postman left for you. There's somethin' due on it, or somethin'."

Lieutenant Stapleton was nearest the door. He opened it, and took the package from the landlady, turned as if to hand it to Willie.

Then Willie's mind lost all semblance of order. He thought he had gone through everything to perfection, but now looking at the package, he saw what he had missed. In the excitement of seeing that policeman near the mail box, he had forgotten to put the stamps on the package! And with his own return address on it, the mailman had brought it back for postage!

Willie Needham's nerves were at the breaking point. He had carried out his scheme to perfection; he had even overdone it a little; in fact, he had really overdone it. If he had not talked so much, Detective Stapleton would have been on his way to headquarters, and Willie Needham would have been on his way West. That Willie would not have found the fortune he expected awaiting him never entered his mind. All he could think of now was that the fortune for which he had

killed was in the detective's hands—and Willie wanted it!

Willie's fists smashed out against the detective's face, catching him unprepared. The fury of the blows floored the detective. Willie's eager hands grabbed the parcel, and his legs carried him over Stapleton's body. Willie ran with great lunging strides.

But before Willie had hit the top of the stairs, Stapleton was after him. One long dive brought detective and victim in a rolling bundle to the foot of the stairway, sprawled over the loose bills which fell out of the money package as it broke in the scuffle. The hands of Lieutenant Stapleton were firm around Willie's wrists. The grip of the handcuffs snapped over them in the next minute, was even firmer.

The lieutenant's voice was low, cold.

"I thought the prints looked pretty much like yours, but I couldn't be too sure, and I didn't want to spoil your vacation. You acted scared when I first came in, but most people—especially innocent people—are very often scared by the law momentarily."

"I couldn't have known what was in that package. You'd have gotten away with it—if your nerves had stood the strain. Now you'll be having your vacation, Willie, at a different kind of resort than you planned."

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THE KILLER CAME HOME

by ROBERT C. DENNIS

Ben Tucker wasn't smart, like the killer, so there wasn't a thing he could do to protect his home—or was there?



Jerry laughed. "I could always outsmart you."

BEN TUCKER cut his meat into bite-sized pieces and then began chewing methodically. Across the bare kitchen table his wife huddled in her chair, her soft brown eyes staring at nothing. The little radio on the shelf emitted a crackle of static and dance music.

"You ain't eatin', Stell," Ben said.

Outside, the rain kept up its dreary

patter on the roof. The wind had shifted a little, and the river was slapping at the piles that supported the wharf. "Can't hear nothin' with that racket, anyhow," Ben said. "We might as well turn it off."

Stell motioned for him to be silent. The news came on in a burst of static.

"Late advices . . . indicate . . . Jerry Rand has broken through the dragnet . . .

daylight robbery . . . Northern Michigan bank . . . Rand seeking means to cross into Canada . . . police have doubled their guard at Abbotsville, Michigan, Rand's birthplace . . . on the . . . river . . ."

Stell's voice was flat. "They didn't get him."

Ben reached up and clicked off the radio. This was the first time she'd referred to Jerry since that day, three years ago, that she had decided for some reason to marry Ben instead. Even now, Ben couldn't tell whether or not his wife was still in love with Jerry. He wished he knew, but he didn't. He just didn't know.

He got up and lumbered over to the window. In the failing light the black line of the Canadian shore seemed far away. It was only a mile across, or a little more—allowing for the jog to get around Pigeon Island. A lonesome, uninhabited clump of undergrowth, the island lay mid-way between, too unimportant to be used by either country. Ben spoke without turning. "They'll gather him in, sooner or later. They get 'em all."

"Do you think he'll come this way?"

Stell looked at Ben and there was something unreadable in her eyes.

"Reckon so," Ben said. "He'll need a

boat. He couldn't swim when we was kids, and I don't figger he's taken time to learn since. He knows the river best long here."

"Maybe he'll steal one of our boats."

Ben nodded. He'd been worrying about the boats. There were eight of them, clinker-bottom rowboats that he rented to fishermen from the city. He also sold bait and fishing tackle. It wasn't very profitable, but it was an honest living. . . .

The room was strained with a sense of expectancy, of waiting. It grew as time dragged on. Ben was mortally certain that Jerry would come this way. It was his best chance; his only chance. The police should be watching for him here; up at the corner by the highway was no good. Jerry would slip around them. Ben wondered why he didn't just go up there and bring the cops down.

He looked at Stell. He wouldn't go unless she suggested it. It was up to her. She stared back without speaking. Ben looked away. He was afraid to look any deeper for fear of seeing what he didn't want to see. . . .

When the time came—when they both heard the sound on the sodden boards outside—Stell's eyes met his again.

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Ben said evenly, "I guess that'll be him."

It was. Jerry pushed through the door, a gun in his hand. Ben had a sudden feeling of disappointment. He had never been able to associate his remembrance of Jerry with the headline killer. He had expected that Jerry had changed in the three intervening years. He hadn't. He had the same thin, cowardly face, the same cruel eyes. The only difference was the gun.

HE MOVED across the room, dripping water from the brim of his dark hat and from his sodden trench-coat. He said, "Hello, Benny . . . hello, Stella." He kept one ear cocked, listening all the time. "You still got boats, Benny?"

Ben said, "Yeah."

"Get moving then," Jerry said, harshly. "You're rowing me across the river."

Ben said, "No."

Jerry leaned forward and struck him across the bridge of the nose with the gun. Ben lunged off his chair, disdaining the weapon. He knew that Jerry wouldn't dare shoot. A shot would bring the cops.

Ben kept walking in, and Jerry dodged back, slashing viciously. Ben threw a punch that staggered Jerry against the wall. Jerry swung the gun again, a frightened, hunted look in his eyes. "Stay away, Ben!" he screamed. "Back up or I'll kill you! Stella—!"

"Stop, Ben," Stell cried. "Stop—don't touch him."

Ben let his arms drop limply. All feeling went out of him.

Stell's voice was completely colorless. "Row him across, Ben."

Ben put on a raincoat and an old cap, moving silently, dully. Then he led the way out, never once looking back. The rain had stopped and fog lay on the river like a huge ghost. He unlocked one of the boats and waited until Jerry was seated in the stern. Then he shoved out.

"I'd row around all night in this soup," Jerry said, "but you can do it in ten minutes. I'll give you just that long."

"It's more than a mile, goin' around the island," Ben said.

"Twelve minutes," Jerry amended.

Ben rowed steadily for a while, then

asked, "How do I know you won't start banging anyway?"

"Why you poor dope, I wouldn't waste a bullet on you. You're small-time, Ben, you ought to know that by now."

The fog hung like a curtain, cutting the boat off into a world alone. "Maybe so," Ben said, "but there ain't nobody chasing me. I got a home and a—a wife."

Jerry said, half to himself, "You beat me out once. You never had nuthin' to do with it, though. Who'd ever thought Stella'd give me my walking papers for a guy like you?"

Ben's throat went suddenly dry. "You mean Stell threw you over?"

"You could call it that," he sneered. She said, 'Ben may not be as smart as you, but he's good. He'd be good to me.'"

Ben asked softly, "I'm not as smart as you?"

Jerry laughed. "I could always out-smart you!"

Jerry kept peering at his watch. "You got half a minute," he said finally.

"I can touch bottom now." Ben swung the stern around toward shore. "Any particular spot?"

"This is okay. It's plenty dark here." Jerry leaped on to the bank.

Ben said, truthfully, "Sure glad you dropped in, Jerry. I've been wanting to have a talk with you for a long time." He got his bearing and headed for home.

Stell and the police were waiting on the wharf. "Ben, Ben!" Stell threw her arms around his neck, sobbing. "I was afraid he was going to hurt you again." Her soft fingers hunted for the cut on his nose.

One of the resentful officers spoke up. "She hid the boat keys on us so we couldn't go after you. She said there'd be shooting and you might get hurt."

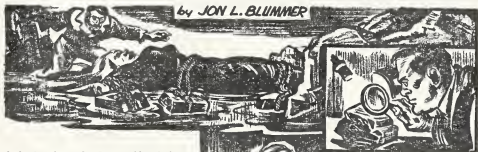
"You should have delayed him," a second cop said, sourly. "We were right near by."

"That's the whole trouble," Ben said. "You're always just near by. You let him get outta that there dragnet that way. Now me, I ain't smart, but I know my way around in my own business!"

He tightened his grip on Stell's shoulders. "I put a net around him he won't slip outta. There sure ain't no way that he's gonna get offa Pigeon Island!"

ODDITIES IN CRIME

by JON L. BLUMMER



A body found on the Jersey side of the Hudson River presented a baffling case until the science of geology was called upon. The corpse had been weighted with pieces of broken stone. At first it was believed that the crime had been committed near by. However, the stones were ascertained to have come from the rock bed of upper Manhattan, and the locale of the crime established at a subway excavation there.

A button is a button. The suspect was contemptuous when the pieces of a button picked up at the scene of a burglary fitted perfectly the fragment still clinging to his coat. But a greatly enlarged photograph showed that the microscopic marks, made when the button was machined, all matched.



The brain emits electric impulses which, recorded by the electroencephalograph, may be studied by psychiatrists who can thereby detect abnormal minds. A man who was tried for a motiveless murder was saved from a death sentence when a record showing abnormal brain-waves was introduced at his defense. He claimed to have had no recollection of the shooting. He was adjudged guilty but insane.

The allowance of this record, diagnosing a hidden insanity, brings closer together the unjust difference in the definitions of medical and legal insanity. In some of our states a murderer declared insane by medical authorities may still be given the extreme penalty as legally sane.



Death was the penalty for horse thieves in the old days of Dodge City. How times and crimes changed! There, recently, was perpetrated a hold-up with six-shooters. Two men robbed an automobile driver of his gasoline ration books and his car license plates!



Gray Dawn Over Broadway

Brad didn't really owe Eddie Rome anything—but with the girl it was different. He owed her his life, and his chances of paying off were one in seven million.



The youngster swiveled the automatic.

BRAD MYLER pulled the collar of his camels-hair up around his ears, the brim of his borsalino down over his forehead. But it wasn't the chill night wind that bothered him so much as the frigid stares; he was fed up with stalking the sidewalks of Times Square in plain-clothes when every second guy he ran into wore a uniform.

It wasn't Brad's fault he was wearing gray worsted instead of khaki. But people who passed him on the street couldn't be expected to remember what Eddie Rome's forty-five calibre slug had done to Brad's shoulder that night ten years ago. Cops don't wear wound stripes.

by **STEWART
STERLING**

Even the police reporters had forgotten about it before Eddie had swapped his longshore racket for a pine box as a result of Brad's being able to shoot from a prone

position in the gutter. By the time Brad had emerged from the hospital to exchange his silver badge for the gold one of a first-grade detective, the boys in the back rooms were asking him if he'd been away on vacation.

Aside from the switch to the prowling squad, all he had to show for that business was a game wing that nobody but the army doctors had noticed. He'd feel better if he could get a little closer to the war than helping M.P.s muscle a rambunctious private out of a bar-and-grill before wrecking all the glassware.

He wasn't accomplishing even that much tonight. Guys on furlough or gobs on shore-leave found things to do indoors when the thermometer outside Cindy's registered nine above and the tires on the milk trailers creaked on the dry snow of Seventh Avenue. Not even the usual four A.M. refugees from the hot spots were visible at this hour.



ASIDE from the newsman at the subway kiosk and a taxi-jockey warning his hands over the fire in the ashen at Forty-seventh, the only person in sight was that solitary blonde hanging around outside the all-night drug-store. She'd been standing there since he passed ten minutes ago on his way up the other side of the main stem. A cold place to keep a date when she could step inside the store and keep warm at the same time. Brad slowed his pace to give her the once-over lightly.

She was back in the doorway. He couldn't see her face very well, with her chin buried in the big collar of that mink coat.

He lounged over to the store window, displayed interest in an assortment of cough remedies.

She turned her head away. He crossed over to the other window, got a good peek at her. She was worth a second look, too. And there was something familiar about that short, upturned nose; that wide, full mouth. He knew that face. Or did he?

He blew out his breath in a funnel of gray steam; he was getting as fidgety as any probationer eager for his first pinch. But the pains she took to ignore him was

kind of queer, at that. He didn't like it.

He drifted toward the doorway. She stuck her chin in the air, stared pointedly past him.

He glanced through the plate glass into the store. There was only one customer in sight, a youth at the prescription counter at the far end of the pharmacy. Brad could see the white coat of the night clerk partly hidden by the customer's back.

"Kind of chizzly, hah, sister?" Brad said.

She ignored him. The detective reached for the door handle, unbuttoned the top two buttons of his overcoat. "Too cold to be sticking around outside." Might be just a coincidence—the lone customer way at the other end of the store, the lone girl where she could act as lookout. But that was the way the stickup crews worked; this was the time of night they usually picked, too. Midway in the twelve to eight tour of police duty, when the boys on fixed posts were likely to be grabbing a bite to eat or taking a personal.

"Wouldn't care for a scup scoff, hah?" If his position happened to block her off, keep her from edging past him to the street, that was just a coincidence, too. He swung the door open, and slid his left hand under a sleeve of the mink coat.

She started to pull away, and he said, "Now, now. Don't be like so."

The customer turned his head quickly at the sound of Brad's voice. He was a youngster, not more than twenty or so. From the quick glimpse Brad caught, the youth seemed to be sore about something. But the thing that made Brad push the girl into the store was the lack of movement on the part of the white-jacketed clerk. Since Brad had first peered through the door, the pharmacist hadn't stirred any more than the statue of Columbus up at the Circle.

The girl tried to tug away. "I beg your pardon! I'm waiting for someone."

"I'm someone." Brad kept her in front of him, between him and the youth at the prescription counter. "I'm police."

She screamed. Not so loud she'd be heard out on the street; just loud enough to warn the dark-haired lad at the other end of the store. He pivoted. Brad could just see the automatic held low down on the counter beside the cash register.

Brad's right hand slid beneath his overcoat. His fingers closed on the butt of the police positive. But he couldn't get it out of his armpit holster; the girl grabbed his wrist with her free hand, crying:

"Dan! Run!"

Brad couldn't see it happen. He was fighting to wrestle the girl away, clear his weapon. But he could tell it wasn't Dan who started to run. It was the druggist, thinking Dan's attention had shifted to Brad. The white jacket dived toward the door in the prescription-room partition.

The gun in the hand of the dark-haired lad spoke sharply. A luminous pencil pointed at the druggist's back.

The pharmacist stumbled as if someone had shoved him between the shoulder-blades. He bumped into the door-jamb, caught hold of it, then sagged slowly to a praying position, knees underneath him, head bent forward against the woodwork.

Dan moved toward Brad with queer, bouncy steps. The plainclothesman stopped trying to muscle the girl away, instead held her close to him.



THE dark-haired youth was either very scared or hopped up. Probably both, from the tense whiteness of his nostrils, the glitter in his oversize pupils. Brad had seen kids like that before, taken in raids on midtown marihuana parlors.

"Get a-way from heem, Letty!" There was a curious, slurring accent to the youth's words. He held the gun close to his right overcoat pocket, the way they did it in gangster movies. Smoke dribbled from the muzzle like fumes from a cigarette left burning in an ashtray. He was going to shoot again, Brad guessed.

"Cut it out, Danny!" The girl clung fiercely to Brad's right wrist. "You've done enough!"

Dan flattened his teeth against his lips, began to circle around her. "He is asking for it, no?"

"Danny! This one's a cop!" She faced him. Her coat flew open. The detective had a glimpse of a blue dress cut low. She kept circling, too, her body shielding Brad's. "You must be crazy—"

"I would be crazy—" his voice was so

low Brad could scarcely hear it—"to leaf this polecree so he send the radio cars after us."

Brad had the police positive halfway out, between the lapels of his overcoat. The girl still gripped the pistol barrel, trying to wrench it away. He relaxed his fingers, let her feel the weight of the revolver in her hand. She didn't take her eyes off Dan, merely slid her fist along to the butt, pulled the gun loose from the camels-hair lapels.

"Listen, Danny. I wasn't in on your dirty work." She brought the thirty-eight down slowly in front of her, held it out, the barrel level with Dan's belt buckle. "I don't intend to be in on any more of it, either. If you don't leave the cop alone, I'll kill you myself."

"But he will not leave us alone." The youngster was keyed up to the breaking point. A thread of saliva glistened on his chin. He swiveled the automatic toward her stomach.

Brad held his breath. It wouldn't take the flick of an eyelash to touch off the fireworks. The girl sucked her breath in with a queer hissing sound as if she was in pain.

Outside, tire chains on a truck clattered noisily along the cross-street. A taxi horn squawked. Maybe it was the realization that other people were out there on Broadway only a few feet and a few seconds away. Dan began to back slowly toward the door.

The girl moved away from Brad, followed Dan in a sort of crouch that made the detective think of an animal, stalking. "Keep right on going, Danny."

"Never min' about me," Dan snarled. "Why you not watch him!"

She waited until Dan slid the automatic in his overcoat pocket, opened the door, edged out. She whirled on Brad:

"Give me your word you won't follow us. Not for five minutes, anyway."

He nodded, warily. "Five minutes."

She opened her coat. Silver buttons on the dinner dress glinted briefly. "I gave you a break. Now, give me one." The gun vanished beneath the fur coat. She slipped into the night.

Brad ran to the druggist, knelt down, fumbled at the limp wrist. There was a faint hint of pulse.

He jumped for the phone. . . . Afterwards, waiting in the drugstore for the ambulance, he phoned in the details to headquarters.

Headquarters broadcast the all-borough alarm over both wavebands: *Wanted for hom. Man. N.A. Might be Span. Port-gee, Spks accent. 5, 11, 140, 21, hr blk, ey ditto, chn cleft, nose prom, complex sal. hnds thin, gait chpy, ocoat blk, vel colr, ht dk, sut bl, shus tan, T.M.I.D. carries 32 auto.*

* * *

AN HOUR or so later Brad came out of the hospital and lit a cigarette, moodily. *This Man Is Dangerous.* An understatement. Any narcotic addict was dangerous. When the drug user is a youngster with a yen to show the world how tough he is—he's like a cottonmouth moccasin in a crowded subway car.

Still, that wasn't quite the whole story. There was the girl.

By the book, Letty was an accomplice before the fact. Partner to a felony. Participant in a holdup that would have ended in murder if it hadn't been for quick work on the part of the surgeon who'd done the transfusion. And Brad. But the detective wasn't kidding himself. Giving up a pint of blood didn't square it. He should have phoned in Letty's description along with Dan's. And he hadn't.

He'd told the truth about her—as far as he went. She was wearing a fur coat, he had stated. She was young, white, spoke English. He had to cover himself that far in case they picked up Dan and ran him through the mill.

Yet he'd protected the girl, too. Nobody was going to walk up to her and tap her on the shoulder as a result of his vague references to her approximate height,

weight, or coloring. *Hadn't paid much attention to her*, he'd notified lieutenant Ames. *Too busy watching the gun user. He couldn't recall. . . .*

He'd been right about that in one respect, at least. He still *couldn't* recall where he'd seen her before. Or who she reminded him of. But he'd paid enough attention to her, all right. He'd stored away enough details in his mind to be able to draw a picture of her—if he'd been able to draw anything more than his city check. He wasn't likely to forget the girl who'd saved his life at the risk of her own.

He couldn't just let it go at that, though. If he wasn't going to help the uniformed force put the finger on her, he had to locate her himself. Because it stood to reason she was the best lead to this hopped-up Danny. If Brad was going to hold out on that lead in order to give the girl a break, he'd have to follow it up himself or chuck his badge back on the divisional captain's desk.

He hopped a subway, rode downtown.

The lieutenant was worrying a cigar butt to frazzles. "They say the druggist will live, huh?"

"Sure. He's got enough sulfa in him to float a battleship." Brad didn't think there was any need of mentioning the transfusion.

"When can I put the quiz to him about the dame?"

"Don't believe he got a look at the dame, lieutenant. She was just coming in the door when he got hit."

"If he noticed her at all he'll be able to tell us more about her than you did."

"Maybe." Brad shrugged; his face didn't show he'd overlooked the possibility that the druggist could describe Letty. People who have to stare at the business end of a gun sometimes get so rattled they can't remember their own names.

Want to read another story by the fine author of the one you are now reading? Get a copy of DIME MYSTERY magazine and lose yourself in Stewart Sterling's great book-length novel, "The Secret of Madam Zenobia." Death strikes from the air in this thrill-packed yarn of corpses and gimmicks on the carnival grounds. On sale November 3.

But once in a while that kind of excitement tunes a person's faculties up so everything he sees is registered in his mind as indelibly as on a film. If the pharmacist up there in the hospital should turn out to be one of the latter type, by this afternoon the town would be too hot for Letty. If Brad was going to get to her first he'd have to move fast. He'd have to move fast, and keep on moving.

He thumbed the pile of photographs on the lieutenant's desk. "This the N.A. file?"

"Fifteen to twenty-five, males. Run through 'em."

"Yair." Brad turned the pictures over slowly. His eyes were on the alert for Dan's features. But his mind was trying to figure out how to go about locating one blonde girl out of seven million people. He was no expert at this *cherchez-la-femme* stuff.

"Maybe the babe was an addict, too." Ames spat out shreds of tobacco leaf. "I'll get the boys to sort out the she hop-heads if you think you could spot her among them."

Brad shook his head. "I couldn't tell her from Eve." He stared at the photograph he'd just turned up.

The front face showed a roly-poly countenance with bold eyes, a wide, full mouth. The profile view outlined a short pug nose, a chin that indicated belligerency, and bushy brows.

"Got him, Myler?"

Brad pulled down the corners of his lips, shook his head. "Hell, no. Just wondering how this old shot of Eddie Rome got in with the fifteen to twenty-five group. Must have been made a long time ago." He tossed the picture on the face-down pile. "Eddie's been dead ten years now. And he was over thirty when he—got killed."

"You ought to know about that," Ames growled. "You were there, weren't you?"

"Yair." Brad riffled through the last of the prints. "I'll remember Eddie for quite a while."

He remembered something else, too, now that his recollection had been so well refreshed.

Eddie Rome had left a daughter. She'd be around twenty now, near as Brad could figure it.

THE boys playing pinochle in the muster room of Brad's old precinct station couldn't help much. All they knew was that some institution had taken Eddie Rome's kid after his funeral. None of the Rome clan had been around the district in a dog's age. Nobody'd seen Letty Rome since she wore skirts above her knees, pigtailed down her back.

Brad nosed around the block where the Romes had lived. No dice.

There was one other angle, strictly in the long shot class. But he was gambling anyway, wasn't he, on holding back the girl's description?

He spotted one of the green-and-white coupes on roving patrol, gave it the high-sign, had the bluecoats roll him up to the garment center near Sixth Avenue.

The thirty-story building where they let him out housed more people than most small cities. It took Brad a while to locate the one individual who might help him. She was a gray-haired woman behind a mahogany flat-top in a publishing office littered with sketches, photographs, piles of newspaper clippings.

Office boys kept slipping in, dropping batches of typewritten sheets in wire baskets labeled *Coats, Millinery, Dresses, Accessories*. She paid no attention to them or to the jangling of phones.

"Something like this, was it, Mister Myler?" She sketched rough lines on a big block of paper.

"Yair." How had she managed to get the picture of Letty's blue dress so surely out of the scraps of information he'd been able to remember? "The buttons were in a double line, kind of. There was some tricky cord across the front, about here." He indicated the breasts on the figure taking shape under deft strokes of her pencil.

"Blue satin? Silver buttons? White lacings?" She smoothed her hair with the pencil, reflectively. "Haven't seen any stock number like that. Sounds like an exclusive. Made up by one of the high-bracket shops. Our paper doesn't cover every dress the *coutouriers* carry, of course. Try Fifth Avenue, why don't you. Or Fifty-seventh Street."

He did. He tried a dozen of the swanky stores before he got the nibble at *Lancheurs, La Mode Manhattan*.

The pink-cheeked, bald-headed little

man to whom Brad showed the editor's sketch pursed up his lips, frowned. "Yes. The neckline, it was decidedly different. The drape something more chic. But this is a Lancheur exclusive, quite."

"Who bought it, Mister Lancheur?"

The dress-designer waved a pudgy palm. "I do not trouble myself with details. One moment." He summoned an assistant.

Brad paced up and down on the inch-thick carpet, ran a finger around inside his collar. This plate glass and chromium background was a little rich for his blood. The fragrance of gardenias in the salon didn't smell much like the odors in the tenement house where Eddie Rome had lived. Eddie's daughter had come quite a distance since those days. Which was okay with Brad, providing she'd made the grade the right way.

The assistant produced a slip of paper.

"The model you are interested in," Lancheur murmured, "was taken by Mrs. Daniel Catraz."

"Address?" Brad asked.

"Hm." The bald-headed man was puzzled. "One fears a mistake has been made. My establishment is not patronized—as a rule, you understand—by persons from this section of the city." He held the slip out for the detective to read.

"West Forty-eighth. Between Broadway and Eighth." Brad reassured himself that the gun he'd borrowed from Ames was hanging right in the shoulder harness. "You can't ever tell about people from that part of town. That's where the theatrical crowd hangs its pajamas."

* * *

THE apartment house on West Forty-eighth wasn't the sort of place where Brad would have expected to run into a mink coat or a ritzy dinner gown. The glass in the front door was thick with grime, the carpet in the gloomy little lobby was threadbare. The Negro at the switchboard wore an ancient sweater instead of a uniform. He inspected Brad without curiosity, returned to his comic supplement.

The plainclothesman studied the cards over a row of brass mailboxes. *Catraz* was engraved on the one above the 4C

slot. Brad picked out another name on the fourth floor, wandered into the elevator.

"Humphrey."

"Flo' B." The Negro slammed the door of the cage, took him up.

He sauntered along the corridor, pretended to punch the button beside the 4B door.

When the elevator clanked noisily downward, Brad moved quietly to 4C, put his ear to the door panel.

There was someone inside there, moving around.

He tiptoed back to the Humphrey door, listened, heard nothing. He rang the bell. Nobody came.

He rang again, long and loud, then clumped heavily to 4C, jabbed the button. The sounds inside the apartment ceased. He gave the buzzer another try, called: "Express."

Letty's voice was muffled by the door. "I'm not expecting any package."

"Express for Humphrey." He did his best to sound bored.

"Next apartment." She was close to the door now.

"Somebody got to sign for it, lady. I can't leave it without somebody signs." He was making quite a commotion, was counting on her not wanting to attract any special attention. "Ya wanna sign for it?"

She opened the door a crack. "The Humphreys live—Oh!!"

He shoved his foot over the sill, bumped the door with his good shoulder, slammed it back against the wall.

He watched the two doors opening off the hallway. "Where's the boy friend?"

"Dan's . . . gone," she gasped.

"Be back pretty soon?"

"I don't know when he'll be back." She hesitated. "Or if he'll be back."

Brad thought she was telling the truth, but he had to be sure. He made her go through the rooms ahead of him, open the closet doors. Dan was out, all right.

On the day-bed in the living room a suitcase lay open, half packed with pink silk, toilet articles.

"Planning a getaway?"

"I was going away. By myself. I couldn't keep on living with him after last night." She didn't appear to notice the pistol in the detective's hand.

"He know you're running out on him?" Brad inspected the guitar case in the corner, the music rack with sheets stacked on it.

"I told him I was through. Yes." Maybe it was the plain traveling suit or the absence of the mink coat—somehow she didn't look quite as Park Avenue here in the gray light filtering in from the air-shaft. The spark had gone out of her eyes. She hadn't taken much care with her makeup. The resemblance to Eddie Rome was a lot stronger.

Letty brushed a stray strand off her forehead, listlessly. "It was bad enough being married to a guy who had to dope himself up every night before he could go to work. I stood that, long as I could. I couldn't stand living with a murderer."

Brad gave the suitcase a going over. His gun wasn't there; there wasn't anything there but girls clothes. "How long's he been on the stuff?"

"Since before I married him."

"Musician, is he?"

"He's the best guitar player that ever came out of South America." She was bitter. "But he thinks he's no good unless he's loaded to the gills."



BRAD picked up a handbag from the table, opened it. The money compartment was stuffed with bills. "I don't get it. Why'd you have to pull a stickup when he's got a job and you've got plenty of things you could hock? Like that mink coat."

"Are you kidding?" She squinted at him. "Dan wasn't after money."

"Oh. Drugs?"

"Yes. He'd have paid for what he wanted. If the man in the drugstore had only let him have the stuff. He wanted me there so nobody'd come along and take him in on a narcotic charge if the druggist gave an alarm or something."

"Yair? You knew he had a gun."

"He told me he'd only use it to frighten the man in the store."

Letty held her arms out at her sides, let them drop listlessly. "What difference does it make?"

"Might make a lot. Why didn't he get the stuff where he usually bought it?"

"He didn't buy it, usually. Somebody in South America's been sending it."

"Yair? Just like that. Through the mail, I suppose."

"Through the mail." She went over to the music rack. "Whoever it was—Dan wouldn't tell me—sent him a batch of these special arrangements for conga and samba numbers." She ran her fingers along the tape which bound several of the sheets of music together. The tape was loose. Brad saw there would have been room enough between it and the paper for half a dozen decks of heroin or cocaine.

"Something might have happened to his friend in Chile." She went over to the suitcase, closed it. "Dan hasn't heard from there for three or four weeks—though he's been writing down there nearly every day." She snapped the lock, swung the suitcase off the day-bed. "I blame that devil in South America for what happened in the drugstore. He's got Dan so he'll do anything to keep coasting on that stuff." She looked down at the luggage. "They won't take my things away from me in prison, will they?"

"You're not going to prison." Brad was surprised to hear himself making the statement. "Not if you use a little sense. You're going out that door and out of town as fast as you can. I'm giving you that break I owe you."

"You're letting me go?" She stared, unbelieving.

"I'm telling you to go. That doesn't mean Dan'll get off." He hefted the gun. "I'll have to go after him. Where's he work?"

"San Vedros orchestra. They're playing at the Center Canteen. For the service men. But you won't find him there, now."

"We'll find him somewhere. You just get clear before we do. Better give me my gun before you go."

"Dan took it. He said he might have to use it. You want to be careful."

"I'll bear it in mind." He waved the borrowed thirty-eight, watched her move toward the door, hoping he was doing the right thing.

HE WASN'T any too sure about it, now. Because it stacked up pretty ugly, the things she'd told him. Dan's playing in an orchestra in a service

men's canteen—where he'd be likely to pick up information that might interest the Japanazis. The 'friend' in Chile who thought enough of the letters Dan had been routing down south to send back a supply of snow. *Who had quit sending the stuff in just about the time Chile had severed relations with the Axis and clamped down on swastika-spies and sons of the sinking sun!*

She turned at the door. "I never liked cops," she said. "But you're not a bad guy—for a cop."

"I know what you mean."

She opened the door, went out, came back in—*with Dan behind her.*

"You want to be careful!" he mocked. "You want to know where your gun is!"

He fired. The bullet went into the floor; the girl had slapped down at the pistol barrel.

Brad held his borrowed gun out stiffly at arms length as if he was on the revolver range at headquarters.

Brad lined up the sights. But the gun in Dan's hand spoke first.

A red hot wire ran across Brad's forearm. He steadied himself, squeezed the trigger without haste. The pistol jumped in his hand.

Letty disentangled herself from the dead weight that slumped against her.

Brad got to her quickly.

"Skip the suitcase. Use the stairs. Get going."

"He's dead." She acted as if she didn't understand what she was saying.

"Don't talk about it. Beat it. Get out of here fast!"

"What's the use? Have to hide from people all the rest of my life. I thought if they'd caught Dan—and he'd confessed—it would square it a little, for me. But now—"

"Better the way it is. There wasn't any murder, anyhow. Only an attempt. That druggist's going to be mixing milk shakes in a month."

She watched him pressing his fingers over the wound on his forearm. "You! He hit you!"

"Ah." Brad gestured with his fingers. "Nothing to worry about." It wasn't the first time he'd had a shot in the arm, was it? "Will you get going—or do I have to make a pinch!"

She got out of sight down the stairs before the doors began to slam on the floors below and the phone on the living-room table began to jangle.

Brad hefted the suitcase with his good arm, slid it into a closet before he picked up the receiver.

"Take it easy," he said to the Negro. "Excitement's all over. Just come on up here, give me a hand."

That ought to give her enough leeway to get through the lobby. He felt better about that, about her having another chance.



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"Talk up or I'll
take you apart
piece by piece,"
Ollie growled.

CHAPTER ONE

Waiting Is the Worst

by
**PHILIP
KETCHUM**

SOMEWHERE behind him a waitress dropped a tray of dishes and at the sound of the crash Bill Hopkins jerked to his feet as though he had been jabbed with a pin. He stood there rigid, maybe for thirty seconds, maybe for longer. And then he started trembling and a cold perspiration broke out all over his body. There was a scream tearing at his

throat. It was all he could do to hold it back.

"Easy there, mate," said the man across the table. "This is *Anselmo's* and there's solid rock under the foundations. That was a tray of dishes that hit the floor."

Bill wiped a hand across his face. He sat down and glanced quickly from side to side. Several people were staring at him strangely. The man across the table was working on his soup. He dipped it away from him, very carefully. He was a small man with a thin, pinched face. The backs of his hands were quite hairy.

"Some things stay with you for a long time, don't they?" he said abruptly.

Bill Hopkins made no answer. He reached for his glass of water and drained it. He felt like a chump. He wondered how long it would be before he could whip his nerves back under control. He wondered if he would ever forget that moment when the torpedo had hit and the horror which had followed.

The man across the table finished his soup and pushed the bowl away. He had clear, grey eyes and a small mouth. He was almost bald.

"I know you don't like to talk about it," he said slowly, "but you've got to. Keeping things penned up inside only makes matters worse."



BILL didn't want to talk things out. That wasn't the answer for him. He had a job to do in this town. He had to find a house and a girl with honey-colored hair and a man with a glass eye. He got to thinking again about what Ed Springer had told him. It wasn't much, and maybe it didn't mean a thing, and yet—

"I was torpedoed a couple of times during the last war," said the man across the table. "Maybe you've heard of the *Mary Reubin*. I was first mate. They got us just out of Portsmouth."

Bill shook his head. "I was on the *John Edgecliff*. They picked us off in mid-Atlantic. We were smack in the middle of a convoy. We weren't the biggest ship, or the newest. We were the only one they went after. Figure that out—"

Bill broke off. He was talking too much

and he didn't need an answer. *He knew the answer.* The *John Edgecliff* had been torpedoed because its cargo was the most valuable in the entire convoy. The food-stuffs and ammunition which the other ships had carried could have been replaced but the precision machinery which went to the bottom in the *John Edgecliff* represented a value which was hard to measure.

Bill pushed back his chair and stood up. He hadn't finished his meal but he looked around the room, found his waitress and got his check. He paid the score and headed for the door, suddenly anxious to get over to Joe's. Tonight it might work. Tonight, the man with the glass eye might be there.

It was almost dark outside. Bill headed down the street. He was tall, slender, still under thirty. He looked like a man who ought to be in uniform and he wondered, vaguely, how many people who passed him, thought so. He wore a Merchant Marine pin in the lapel of his coat but he had an idea that most folks didn't recognize it. In these days nearly every one wore some kind of a pin, or patriotic emblem or decoration.

Joe's was on a side street, not far from the waterfront. Bill Hopkins swung that way, slowing down as he neared the place, and looking closely at each man he passed. The man with the glass eye. The only place he knew to find him was here. Ed Springer hadn't had time to tell him more. Ed had been too near death. There had been time only to die.

There was a good crowd at the tavern. Bill found a place at the bar. He ordered his drink and after he had been served, turned and let his eyes circle the room. This was pretty generally a seamen's hangout.

A man with whom Bill had once sailed yelled at him from a table. Bill picked up his drink and walked over to that side of the room.

He said, "Hi, Whitey," and shook hands.

"Gang, meet Bill Hopkins," said Whitey Drake. "Bill's up for a chunk of tin. He was on the *John Edgecliff* when the Heinies blasted it. I don't know why they think he's worth a medal, but they do."

Whitey was a husky, broad-shouldered fellow with an expansive grin. He had a booming voice which could be heard throughout the room. Bill felt a little uncomfortable. He had a notion that everyone in the place was staring at him.

The others at the table nodded and a couple of them got up and reached for his hand. A man sitting alone at the next table had looked up. He was thin, middle aged and had dark hair and eyes. He turned quickly away as Bill glanced at him. Bill caught his breath. He couldn't be sure but he had a feeling that the man's eyes weren't straight.

"We're whipping up a poker game at the Dover, Bill," Whitey mentioned. "How about it?"

AFTER a time, Whitey and the others got up and headed for the Dover. Bill sat where he was, nursing his drink. Without watching the man at the next table, he was acutely aware of him. A minute passed and then another and then Bill heard the scraping of the man's chair.

"Hot as hell in here, isn't it," the man growled.

Bill shrugged his shoulders. He pulled his glance quickly away from the man's face. Under the table his hands were clenched tightly together. Here was the man with the glass eye. He was sure of it.

The man sat down. "I heard what you said a minute ago," he mentioned. "I'm sailing tomorrow, myself. Oiler on the

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Bill Hopkins shook his head. "This is my last night on shore and poker isn't what I want."

"Shipping? What on?"

"The *Posidon*."

"Never heard of her. Where you headed?"

Bill grinned. "Military secret, but if I told you what she carried it'd knock you flat. She's a fast boat and we're not fooling around with any convoy. This is going to be a rush trip brother and double bonus."

Bill had raised his voice just a little. He watched the man at the next table. He had a feeling the man was listening intently.

"Well, have one more drink with us, anyhow."

Bill had another drink and sat for a time with Whitey and his crowd. He listened to Whitey's beef about conditions on the last trip to Murmansk. Whitey didn't complain at all about the dive-bombing his ship had experienced but from what he said, the grub had been terrible.

Mary Meyerson. Hell, with my experience I should have been able to get an engineer's rating, but all I could make was oiler."

Bill looked at the man's hands. They were small and well kept. They didn't look like they had ever done any work.

"I don't blame you for turning them down on that poker game," the man went on. "They tried to rope me in, too. Poker's a hell of a way for a man to spend his last night on shore."

Bill managed a laugh. He said, "Yeah, ain't it. What's your name, mister?"

"Garvin. Sam Garvin."

"Let's have another drink, Sam."

The man smiled. He had a tight skinned, boney face. There wasn't much color in it. He ordered the drinks and said, under his breath, "Wine, women and song. They're the only three things for a sailor on his last night ashore."

"And you can leave out the song," Bill grinned.

The man nodded. "Leave out the song. I know just the place for us."

"Where?"

"Uptown a ways."

Bill Hopkins reached for a cigarette. He lit it, hoping his hands were steady. This was about what had happened to Ed Springer, he told himself. Ed had met this man here and they had talked and then the man had taken Ed someplace and now the *John Edgecliff* was at the bottom of the sea and Ed was dead and with him, Jerry Hall and Wayne Odum and Mike Pappas and a score of others.

"What's this place like?" Bill heard himself asking.

"It's a private home," Garvin answered. "A private home, not a joint. Two dames beautiful enough to sign a Hollywood contract any time they want to and the best liquor on the Atlantic coast."

Bill scowled. He didn't want to sound too eager. "What's the catch?"

"There isn't one, Bill. These dames think the Merchant Marine are the great unsung heroes of the war. I met 'em last night and they invited me to come back again and bring a pal. You don't need a nickle. How about it?"

Bill Hopkins kept the scowl on his face. "I'll walk out if I don't like 'em, Sam. It sure sounds phoney to me."

Sam Garvin stood up. "I'll go call 'em. See if they're in."

Bill watched the man head for the telephone booth. He sucked in a long, slow breath. Here it was, finally, after ten days. Here it was, just as Ed Springer had told him. His hands were perspiring and a shiver was running up and down his back. He smashed out his cigarette.

Sam Garvin came back, grinning.

"I called 'em," he announced. "They said come right on out."

Bill got to his feet. He was a good deal taller than Garvin. He tried a grin. "All right, Sam. But if I don't like 'em—"

"We'll both walk out."

Sam Garvin headed for the door and Bill followed him.

CHAPTER TWO

Brownstone Trap

THEY took a taxi. It was Sam Garvin's suggestion. Bill didn't argue with him. He acted as though the last drink had hit him a little and he let

Garvin help him into the cab. As they started out Bill had a momentary wish that he had told Ed Springer's story to the Naval Intelligence officer who had interviewed him just before he landed. But he hadn't and it was too late now to worry about that.

The taxi headed uptown and stopped in front of a brown-stone house on one of the side streets. There wasn't much to distinguish the house from any of the others in the block. It was three stories high and had tall, old fashioned windows through which a dim light was showing. The number above the door could barely be seen.

"You'll like these girls," Garvin was saying as he rang the bell. "This is real class, Bill. It'll be a night to remember. I reckon you have to go on board in the morning an' sail with the tide at night. What's that ship you're on?"

"The *Posidon*," Bill answered.

He was grinning. He had picked that name out of the air. He wondered if there was a ship named the *Posidon*.

"Don't think I ever heard of it," said Sam Garvin. "What kind of a boat is it?"

"It used to be a yacht," Bill answered. "A big one. Trim, fast. Vanderbilt used to own it. I think. He turned it over to the Coast Guard, and the Maritime Commission borrowed it for this special trip. All that's hush-hush, Sam."

"Sure. I reckon with a fast boat like that you'll go straight across."

"Maybe."

The door in front of them was suddenly opened and against the dim background of the hall Bill could make out a girl's figure. She was a tall girl and stood very straight. She was wearing a long dress which clung to her body closely. The faint smell of perfume reached him.

"Hi, Glenda," Sam called. "Here we are. Shake hands with a top sailor and a first class man. Bill Hopkins."

The girl put out her hand and Bill stepped forward and took it. He didn't know quite what to say. The girl's hand was warm and her clasp over his hand was strong.

"Bill Hopkins," he heard her saying. "Come on in, Bill." And he was rather surprised at the sound of her voice. There wasn't a giggle in it or anything super-

ficial. She seemed genuinely glad to welcome him.

"I'll go on back and find Alice," Sam Garvin stated. "You two behave yourselves."

As he said that, Sam Garvin hurried on down the hall and disappeared through a door to the right.

Bill Hopkins took off his hat. He realized, suddenly, that he was still holding the girl's hand and he released it abruptly. "I don't know quite what to say," he started. "That is, I—"

The girl laughed. She had a nice laugh, low and intimate. "Perhaps you didn't know quite what you were getting into when you came here. Perhaps you expected a different kind of a girl. If you're disappointed, Bill, the door's still open."

Bill stepped inside and pulled the door shut. "It's closed, now."

"Let's go into the front room," Glenda suggested.

She turned and led the way through the wide, high-ceilinged hall and into a dimly lighted parlor. The furniture, here, had an old and stately look and the rug was thick under Bill's feet. A fire was laid in the grate but wasn't lit.

Glenda sat down in the corner of a davenport facing the fireplace. She stretched back and looked up at Bill Hopkins. "You can sit here near me or in that chair, or if you're afraid, clear across the room. I don't bite. Honest."

She seemed to be laughing at him. Her eyes were blue and her features as even as a cameo. Her hair was light. Not exactly blonde, but—*honey-colored*! That was it. Honey-colored.

* * *

BILL shook his head. A girl like this couldn't possibly be involved in the kind of story Ed Springer had told. Why Glenda was hardly twenty and she had eyes that looked straight at you and a voice which left a man shakey.

"Have you decided, Bill?" Glenda asked.

Bill sat down on the davenport near her. He managed a laugh but it wasn't very good. He felt stiff and uncomfortable and a little afraid of what might happen next. He wondered if Glenda ex-

pected him to put his arms around her. He wondered what would happen if he tried.

"I know this all seems awfully strange, Bill," Glenda said softly. "Maybe I can't explain it to you at all. Maybe I can. I'll try. My sister and I are here, all alone. Our mother's been dead for years. Our father was first officer of the *Irving Platt*. He lost his life when it was torpedoed. We had two brothers. They were both lost at sea. We—well, I guess we're sort of soft so far as seamen are concerned. Alice is always picking up some seaman and bringing him home to dinner. Sometimes she invites someone for me. She's much older than I am. In a way it's not awfully satisfactory for me. The men I meet are always sailing away. I suppose you are, too."

Bill nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Soon?"

"Tomorrow."

"I hope you've a big, fast ship, Bill. Is it big and fast?"

Bill Hopkins stared straight ahead. He bit his lips. Here it was, the clever fishing for information which he had expected. And it was being handled in such a damnable clever fashion that if he hadn't have been warned he might not have been aware of it.

"It's not a big ship," he answered slowly. "But it's fast, Glenda. And beautiful. As beautiful a ship as you ever saw."

"Not a freighter, then?"

"A converted yacht."

"But there's not much hold space on a yacht, Bill. Why a yacht? What could you carry?"

Bill looked at the girl and could hardly tear his eyes away from her. She was leaning back with her hands folded under her head. The skin of her neck and breast was smooth and white. There was a faintly provocative smile on her lips. He could catch the scent of the perfume she was using.

"I wish you weren't leaving, Bill," she murmured.

Bill closed his eyes. He thought of Ed Spangler. Ed would have fallen for a girl like this. Fallen hard. There had been a romantic streak in Ed which had often led him into trouble.

"I was on the *John Edgecliff*, last trip,"

Bill heard himself saying. "We were in a convoy. The ship was old. There were better ships all around us and it was a moonlight night when the torpedo hit us. She went through our old tub like she had been tissue-paper. The boilers exploded. We sank in three minutes. There were only eight out of the whole crew whose lives were saved."

He was looking at Glenda, now. Her face seemed a little more pale and she was sitting up. Her hands were clenched at her sides.

"I pulled what was left of one of the men out of what was left of the engine room. I went down with him when the ship went down. Some way or other I held on. A boat from one of the other ships reached us before I passed out. When I came to, the man I had saved was dying. He was almost cut in two. Just like the ship. His name was Ed Springer."

The girl's body twitched. Her lips were so tight across her face that most of their color was hidden. A shudder ran over her. "I don't like to hear stories like that, Bill," she whispered. "Please, Bill, I don't like that story."

Bill's laugh was harsh. "Maybe not. I didn't like it, either. Ed doesn't care any more. He's dead, and so are a lot of others. But Ed would have liked you, Glenda. He would have—almost worshipped you."

There was a sound from the hallway. Bill glanced around. Sam Garvin had entered the room. One of his hands was in his coat pocket and he wasn't wearing the grin he had affected on the way out here. His eyes were narrowed, watchful. Bill wondered how much of what he had said had been overheard. A sudden cold shiver ran over his body.

"There isn't any *Posidon*," Garvin said abruptly. "Just who are you, Hopkins? What's your game?"

Bill Hopkins came to his feet. He tried to stave off the feeling of panic which was crowding up his throat. His lips were dry. He moistened them, took a quick look at the girl and then looked quickly back at Garvin.

"No game at all," he answered. "I made up a story for Whitey. You heard it and believed it and so what?"

A PUZZLED look spread across Garvin's face and then ended in a frown. Bill knew a swift hope. He said, "Come on. Let's get out of here. I know a place back down the street where—"

As he said that Bill started forward. Garvin stepped aside, apparently still puzzled. The hall door was a dozen paces away. It was all Bill could do to keep from running for it. Then quite suddenly he wished he had, for Glenda was shouting at Garvin to stop him and Garvin reached out and caught him by the arm and jerked him around.

Bill pulled free. He might have run, even then, but Sam Garvin had pulled a gun and from the frozen look on his face, Bill knew the man wouldn't hesitate to use it.

"He knows about Ed Springer," Glenda was saying, and her voice wasn't low and throaty, now. It was high and there was almost a note of hysteria in it. She didn't look so beautiful or so young, either. "He knows about Ed Springer. He was questioning me about him. He's from the police. Don't let him get away!"

Garvin said, "Ollie! Matt!" He hadn't raised his voice yet there was a sharpness in it.

Two men came in from the hallway. They were both big men. One walked with a crouch and had long arms and a bull-like neck and thick, ugly features. The other man was older and bald and had a flat nose and dark, narrow eyes. They stopped just inside the room.

"This is Bill Hopkins, Ollie," Garvin was saying. "He's got a notion he wants to leave. Maybe you'd better change his mind."

Bill said to Garvin, "What's this all about?"

He didn't seem to be paying any attention to the two men who were closing in on him, yet as they reached him his clenched fist suddenly came up and caught the bald-headed man in the pit of the stomach and from that blow he lunged against the other fellow, staggering him, and swinging a wild punch at the man's head.

Matt gave a startled cry and doubled over. Ollie brought up against a chair, recovered his balance and charged in. Bill

clipped him on the chin, twisted out of the way, ducked under a blow which Matt aimed at him and slammed Matt squarely in the face. Blood spurted from the man's flat nose. Bill hit him again, then whirled to face Ollie. He drove Ollie backwards, stabbing out at him with short, quick jabs which Ollie couldn't block. Then Matt was tearing in again from the side, and a good solid blow set Bill back on his heels, and he bumped into Sam Garvin.

Garvin's arm was raised. Bill saw the gun smashing down. He tried to duck it but wasn't in time. A blinding pain exploded in his head and all the lights of the city seemed to be dancing in front of his eyes. He thought he heard Garvin shouting something but the man's voice sounded far away and indistinct and suddenly was lost in the deep darkness which closed in all around. . . .

When Bill Hopkins recovered consciousness he discovered he was sitting upright in a chair, held there by heavy cords which were wrapped around his body and arms and legs. His shirt was soaking wet and he was cold.

"Slap some more water in his face," someone ordered.

Bill lifted his head. The bald-headed man was standing at one side, a dirty looking bucket swinging from his hand.

"He's comin' around, Sam," answered the bald-headed man. "He don't need no more water."

Sam Garvin moved into the range of Bill's vision. There was a tight, ugly look on Garvin's face. He stood staring at Bill, cracking his knuckles.

"What do you know about Ed Springer?" he asked suddenly.

Bill Hopkins moistened his lips. There was a throbbing pain in his head. He wondered what he could say to get out of this jam. He wished he could line things up more clearly. His mind didn't seem to want to work.

"I—sailed with him," Bill answered thickly.

"And he talked, huh? He talked about coming out here."

Bill groaned. His head dropped forward, and Ollie's hand shot out and slapped him across the face.

"Answer the questions," Ollie growled. "Talk up or I'll take you apart, piece by piece."

Bill stiffened. "Cut me loose and try it."

CHAPTER THREE

Cops Take Their Time

OLLIE slapped him again and everything in the room seemed to start going around. Bill closed his eyes against the dizziness which was almost overpowering him. A splash of cold water from the bucket hit him in the face.

"I suppose Springer blabbed," Garvin was saying.

Bill nodded his head. There wasn't any use trying to hide it. He had almost said as much to Glenda, if that was her name. He had talked out of turn. He had only himself to thank for the position he was in.

"Who else did he talk to," Garvin de-

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manded. "Who did you talk to? What did you tell the Naval Intelligence when you got back?"

Bill's mind grabbed at that. Springer, he knew, hadn't talked to anyone but him, and he hadn't told anyone what Springer had said. *Yet Garvin didn't know that.* In some way or other he had to fashion a bluff which would give him time to get away.

"Well?" Garvin barked.

Bill started to say something but Ollie slapped out at him again, stifling the words. Bill's head sagged forward. Garvin cursed the bald-headed man and sent him for more water. Bill hung against the ropes which held him in the chair. Ollie came back and threw more water over him but Bill didn't move.

"I reckon he's out cold, Sam," Ollie said finally. "I must have hit him too hard."

Sam Garvin muttered something and turned away. "See that he's tied fast, then lock the door and come on upstairs. We'll go to work on him again when he wakes up."

Ollie grunted and gave a tug at the ropes around Bill's body.

"Sure, we'll go to work on you," Ollie promised. "An' it's gonna be a pleasure."

For a long time after Ollie had left, Bill didn't move. He didn't feel like it. Though he hadn't lost consciousness, the collapse hadn't been entirely faked. He was still dizzy when he opened his eyes. This room, he figured, was somewhere in the basement of the house. It was cold and damp. The floor was of concrete. So far as he could tell there were no windows and the only door was the one by which Garvin and Ollie had left. He had heard Ollie lock it.

After a while Bill started struggling with the ropes but he didn't make much headway. Whoever had tied him had done a good job. He could try yelling, of course, but he had a notion his cries wouldn't be heard by anyone outside of the house.

What good it would do him to get free if he couldn't get out of this room, Bill didn't know. He kept on tugging at the ropes. A good deal of time passed, hours it seemed. Then he became aware of the sound of a key in the door and what little

courage he had left, drained away. Here was Ollie and Garvin again, and probably, so far as he was concerned, the end of everything.

It wasn't Ollie or Sam Garvin, however. It was a girl Bill had never seen before. A thin, palefaced girl with stringy, black hair and two of the widest eyes he had ever seen. Perhaps they were fear-widened eyes. The girl certainly acted frightened. She took a quick look into the room and then glanced over her shoulder. After that she hurried straight toward Bill and Bill caught his breath for in her hand she held a long, wide, butcher knife. Bill almost called out, afraid she meant to use the knife on him.

The knife, however, was for the ropes. The girl went to work on them swiftly. Her breath was coming fast.

"You'll have to hurry," she said under her breath. "They'll be back any minute. They'll kill you. I heard them talking."

Bill's arms were free. He reached for the knife and cut the bonds around his legs. The girl had hurried over to the door and was looking up a stairway. There weren't any shoes on her feet. She seemed to be listening intently.

Bill joined her. He didn't feel very steady. "Who are they?" he asked under his breath.

"Germans," said the girl. "Spies. I hate them. I hate them all."

Bill had never heard more bitterness in a human voice. The girl's body had stiffened. Her hands were clenched at her side.

"How do you know they're spies?" Bill asked. "What do you do here?"

* * *

THE girl shook her head. "There's no time to talk. Get away and call the police. Across the hall at the top of the stairs is another door. Go through the room beyond it and out the door to the alley.

Bill Hopkins laid a hand on the girl's arm. "You're coming too."

"I can't."

"But when they know what you've done—"

"They'll never know. They keep me

locked in my room, nights. They've never guessed I had a key to the door."

"You're coming, too," Bill said again.

The girl laid her finger on her lips and then led the way up the stairs. She opened the door at the top very cautiously, listened for a moment and then nodded. Bill could hear voices quite clearly but couldn't distinguish what was being said. "Good luck," whispered the girl. "And hurry."

As she spoke she pulled the door on open, stepped into a darkened hallway and turned to the left. She left so abruptly Bill didn't have time to stop her. He reached for her arm but not in time.

"Let's do it now an' get it over with," rumbled a voice.

A shiver of apprehension raced up and down Bill's spine. Another door into the hallway had been opened and in the shaft of light which reached from the room beyond it he could see a man's shadow.

Bill took a quick look in the other direction. The girl was out of sight. He stepped across the hallway, pulled open a door.

"Be right with you, Matt," someone was saying.

The room into which Bill had stepped was dark. He fumbled his way across it, reached the alley door and a moment later was outside. The sky was still black but a cool wind had come up. He wiped a hand across his face, realizing, suddenly, that he was perspiring. He started running for the nearest street. As he reached it he thought he heard someone shouting at him from the depths of the alley but he wasn't sure. He didn't wait to find out.

* * *

The officer in the police sub-station to which Bill had come was a man in his late fifties. He was tall, square-shouldered, white-haired and looked awfully tired. He asked Bill an almost endless chain of questions, took down notes and then spent close to ten minutes examining Bill's seamen's papers.

"What are you going to do?" Bill asked bluntly.

The officer scowled. He reached for the telephone, dialed a number, and told Bill's story to someone he called Henry.

After that he hung up and looked over at Bill. He was still scowling.

"Well?" Bill insisted.

"Keep your shirt on, Hopkins," the man answered. "We've gotta handle these things in a routine way. If we rushed out every time someone yelled spy we'd have half the city in an uproar. Take a seat."

Bill bit his lips. He moved to a seat at one side of the room and sat back in it. Five minutes passed and then ten. Officers came in and out of the room. The minutes built up to half an hour and then an hour. Bill made several attempts to prod the man on the desk but with little success. He wished now that he hadn't stopped here but that he had telephoned directly to Naval Intelligence. He hoped nothing had happened to the girl who had helped him escape. He was more worried than he wanted to admit.

When an hour and a half had passed the door suddenly opened and four men came into the room. One of them wore a naval uniform. He nodded curtly to Bill and then said to the officer, "All right, Meyers. We'll take him."

Bill stood up. This naval officer was Lieutenant Bainbridge. It was Bainbridge who had questioned him for the Office of Naval Intelligence when he had been brought back after the torpedoing. He didn't know the other three men.

"So your memory's coming back, is it, Hopkins?" Bainbridge asked quietly.

Bill could feel a rush of blood to his face. He nodded. "What have you done?"

"These men with me are from the F.B.I.," Bainbridge answered. "We've got a crowd of men out at that address you reported. If your story's straight, I hope they'll be in time. Let's head over to my office and find out."

The fellows with Bainbridge were eyeing Bill soberly. Bill gulped and then nodded. He headed for the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

It Could Be Murder

BILL did more waiting at the O.N.I. It was long after midnight, but Bainbridge's office was still a quietly busy place. Two of the men from the

F.B.I. left after hearing Bill's story in his own words but the other one stayed around with Bill and Bainbridge. He was a middle aged fellow. He didn't look like much. His hair was beginning to thin out and he was a little stooped. Bainbridge was maybe thirty-five, though his eyes looked older.

A couple of telephone calls came in and after a while Bill was asked to wait in another office. He was beginning to feel increasingly uncomfortable. When he had first been interviewed by Naval Intelligence he hadn't told Ed Springer's story because he had wanted to investigate it himself. It had seemed all right to do that, at the time. Now he knew it had been a mistake. He had felt he had a personal grudge against the men responsible for passing on information to the enemy about the *John Edgecliff*. Perhaps he had, but with the country at war a man's first responsibility lay in cooperation with those in authority.

After a time, Bainbridge came into the room. The young Naval officer looked worried. "You said there was a young girl at the house, Hopkins," he stated abruptly. "Maybe about twenty, thin, pale-faced, black hair. There wasn't."

Bill Hopkins came to his feet. "Then something happened to her."

"The family living there," Bainbridge continued, "is named Allerton. There's Sam Allerton, his wife Alice and a daughter, Elizabeth. The daughter is twenty-eight. She's blond and rather attractive. She's the secretary of Carl Hiersfield, an attorney. Allerton works for a dental supply house. He's a salesman. He's lived here twenty years. He belongs to the Lutheran church. He's a Mason. He's on the board of the Boy's Club in his neighborhood. He's an air raid warden. His wife belongs to the Alphas, a sort of a woman's club. She's Eastern Star. They were both born in this country, or at least they claim they were. They seem more bewildered than angry at our investigation."

Bill stared at the lieutenant wide-eyed, hardly able to believe his ears. "But—you are quite sure that you went to the right address?"

Bainbridge repeated the address. He said, "Come back to my office."

Just inside the office door Bill came to an abrupt stop. Three people were waiting in chairs at one side of the room, two women and a man. Sam Garvin and Glenda and an older woman whom Bill didn't know. The man from the F.B.I. and a man in a naval officer's uniform were talking to them.

"Well, Hopkins?" Bainbridge asked of Bill.

Bill Hopkins moved deeper into the room. Garvin, Glenda and the woman were looking at him. No recognition showed in Garvin's eyes. Glenda's face was wholly without expression.

Several paces from them Bill came to a stop.

He said, "Hello, Garvin," and he tried to keep his voice steady. He didn't want to. He didn't feel steady at all. It was all he could do to hold himself from rushing at the man and smashing a fist into the bland face.

Garvin blinked. He turned toward Bainbridge. "Is this the man who says he was at my house?"

Bainbridge nodded.

"But I've never seen him before. I—Elizabeth, do you know him?"

Glenda shook her head. "No father. I'm sure I don't. Of course he may have been at the canteen some night when I was working there."

Bill stared at Bainbridge. He couldn't read a thing in the officer's face. He looked around at the man from the F.B.I. The man from the F.B.I. was watching him closely. There wasn't a sound in the room. Bill could sense the tension which was building up. He turned toward Garvin, took a step toward him and then stopped. He pointed at the man and shouted his accusations, only vaguely conscious of the torrent of words pouring from his lips.

* * *

GARVIN made no answer. He looked puzzled, shook his head. Glenda reached for his arm and drew closer to him as though a little frightened. The woman near Glenda bit her lips and started twisting her hands together nervously.

There was the sudden banging of a

door from across the room. The sound stabbed through Bill like a knife. He jerked around, hardly able to stop the cry which rose to his lips. This was like the sound of that tray of dishes in the restaurant, like any sudden noise. His body was bathed with perspiration.

The man who had slammed the door, the tall, thin naval officer Bill didn't know, was nodding. "Suppose I talk to Mr. Hopkins, Bainbridge," he suggested. "I think this can be straightened out all right."

The man from the F.B.I. came over and took Bill's arm and started him toward the other room. Bill started to pull away but knew suddenly that it would do no good. Garvin had cloaked himself with respectability and a good, solid place in his neighborhood. The accusation against him came from a seaman whose nerves were all shot to pieces as a result of a torpedoing. If he kept on shouting that Garvin was a spy they would probably think he was crazy if they didn't have that idea already.

As he reached the door to the next room Bill looked back. Sam Garvin and the two women were standing up and Bainbridge was talking to them, smiling, apologizing for what had happened.

"That man's gone through a great deal," Bill heard him explaining. "His ship was torpedoed on his last run. Only a few of the crew were saved. His best friend—"

* * *

The naval officer who had slammed the door turned out to be a doctor. He had slammed the door deliberately, Bill knew, and now he was trying to talk Bill into going to a convalescent home. Bainbridge came in after a while. He was quite friendly but he had the same notion as the doctor.

Bill Hopkins held a close rein on his temper. He could see how things were lining up. Sam Garvin had fooled these two men and the doctor's experiment had convinced Bainbridge that he was batty, suffering from war nerves. It wouldn't do any good to argue. What he had to do was get out of here or they would end up by sending him to an institution.

"Sure," Bill said finally. "Maybe I'll go. Let me sleep on it. I'm tired, so damned tired I can hardly hold my head up."

A glint of satisfaction came into the doctor's eyes. "I'll run him down to his hotel," the doctor said to Bainbridge. "See you some time tomorrow."

Bill Hopkins put in twelve hours sleeping. It was noon before he was up and had shaved and went down to the lobby of his hotel. There was a note in his box from the doctor listing a phone number for him to call. Bill didn't make the call. He had breakfast and then walked down to the union hall. The dispatcher was yelling for AB's but Bill stayed away from the window. He wasn't yet ready to go back to sea. He had a job to do first.

Sitting there in the hall, Bill tried to figure things out. For a while, he decided, Sam Garvin would be pretty careful what he did. There wouldn't be any more seamen taken out to his house. Sam would play things cautiously. After a while, of course, and when he was sure he wasn't being watched, the man would go to work again. And word of new sailings would somehow or other be flashed to the submarine packs in the Atlantic. There would be more sinkings, more men like Ed Springer, to pay by their lives for a careless word.

Bill left the union hall and turned up the street. He bought a paper and glanced through it and scowled at a brief article which caught his attention. On the upper east side, the night before, a girl of about twenty had been struck and killed by a hit-and-run motorist. The girl, as yet, hadn't been identified. She was about twenty, thin, dark haired. She had been wearing a white dress. The newspaper description of the girl wasn't very complete.

Bill asked a policeman the way to the morgue. He went there and told a vague story about a sister who was missing. A bored attendant showed him the body of the girl who had been killed in the accident. Bill stared at her. He said the girl wasn't his sister and he hoped his voice was steady, that it didn't show the excitement he felt. *For here in the morgue was the body of the girl who had helped him to escape the night before.*

OUTSIDE, Bill had a cigarette. There was a man loitering across the street, a man who looked a lot like Ollie. Bill headed for the corner. He heard someone coming up behind him. He stopped and looked around, then clenched both fists and waited. The man was Ollie, all right.

Ollie came to a stop a bare pace from where Bill was waiting. One hand was in his pocket. Bill had a notion it was wrapped around a gun. He felt unusually calm. There were people passing along the street but no one seemed interested in them.

"There'll be a car here in a minute," Ollie said abruptly. "We'll wait for it."

"Why did you kill her?" Bill asked suddenly.

Ollie took a quick, nervous look over his shoulder. Bill Hopkins didn't need any more chance than that. He stepped forward and snapped up his fist. Every bit of weight in his body was behind that blow. Ollie's head jerked backwards. He twisted half around and his knees folded up and he hit the ground. A gun came out of his pocket as he fell. It skidded along the sidewalk. A woman who had just been passing gave a startled scream.

Bill started for the gun, then changed his mind and kept on going. He saw a policeman racing toward the crowd which had gathered. There would have been a lot of satisfaction in sticking around and watching Ollie get arrested—maybe. But maybe there was a chance Ollie would turn out to be a member of the Rotary Club and the Rationing Board and a reputable citizen. And the result might be that Bill would find himself on the way to a nut-house.

At the corner, Bill turned left. He caught a bus and rode it a dozen blocks, left it and headed for a drug store. From a telephone booth he telephoned the Office of Naval Intelligence and got Bainbridge on the wire.

"John Hopkins talking," he reported as soon as he was sure he had Bainbridge. "I just saw the body of a girl in the morgue. She was supposed to have been killed by a hit-and-run driver, last night. She's the girl who helped me to escape from Sam Garvin."

There wasn't a sound from the phone.

"When I left," Bill went on, "one of the men who helped beat me up last night was outside, watching. He came over to me and ordered me to wait for a car. I hit him and walked off. He had a gun. Maybe the cop who hurried up will bring him in. If you get to him in time, maybe he'll talk."

"Where are you, Hopkins?" Bainbridge asked.

"In a phone booth."

"Listen, I want to see you. Can you come right down to the office?"

"Sure," Bill agreed dryly. "Sure, I'll be right down."

He hung up and as he turned away there was a wide grin on his face. Since meeting Ollie he felt a good deal better. Or maybe it was that he knew what he was going to do. There was a taxi at the curb. Bill climbed in and gave the driver an address. He stared at his hands, opening them and closing them. They were good hands—thin, long fingered, strong hands.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sailor Reads a Book

BY DAY, the house looked dingy and old. All the blinds fronting on the street were drawn. Bill paid off the cab driver and hurried up the steps. Instead of ringing, he tried the door. It was unlocked. He opened it and stepped inside.

It took a moment to accustom his eyes to the shadows in the hallway. It was cool in the house and not a sound reached his ears. There was an umbrella stand near the door and in it a cane. Bill reached for it. The cane was pretty heavy. It might make a fairly good club. He moved on down the hall. The carpet muffled his footsteps. He came to the room where he had met and talked to Glenda. The room was empty. He started across it, then came to an abrupt stop. Someone was at the outside door. He heard the sound of it opening and the sound of voices. A man and a woman were coming up the hall.

Bill looked swiftly around for somewhere to hide. There was a high-backed chair in the room, facing away from the

hall. He sat down in the chair and waited, every muscle tense.

The man and woman came as far as the room and stopped. "Why don't you wait here," said the woman's voice. Glenda's. "I'll see if father's in. I'll send him right down or be back myself."

"Don't just send him down," answered the man. "Come with him."

The man's voice sounded awfully familiar. Bill wanted desperately to look around. Glenda was laughing.

"Maybe," she promised. "At least I'll see you again before you leave. I'll have to persuade my father I met you in front of the house, I'll not be long, lieutenant."

Bill caught his breath. *Lieutenant!* Lieutenant Bainbridge.

Bainbridge moved on into the room. He crossed to the fireplace. Bill could see him, now, and if Bainbridge looked in the right direction, Bainbridge would know he wasn't alone in the room. It was pretty dim in here, but not that dim.

The lieutenant's eyes circled the room but he gave no start of surprise. He didn't seem to notice the man in the chair. Bill knew that his face was covered with perspiration. He bit his lips. He felt like a fool.

"Ah, good afternoon, lieutenant," came Sam Garvin's voice from the hallway. "I hadn't expected another visit from you so soon."

Bainbridge moved forward to meet the man. The lieutenant was smiling. He seemed perfectly at ease.

"And I hadn't planned to come here," he admitted. "But a rather unfortunate thing happened a little while ago. The man you met last night, Bill Hopkins, read in the paper the story of some girl who had been killed in a hit-and-run accident. He went to the morgue and identified her as the girl who had helped him escape from here."

"Impossible, lieutenant. Why no one has ever lived here but my own family. Why—"

"Of course. But Hopkins, as I explained to you, is suffering from a shock as a result of his experiences at sea. The man isn't all there."

"Shouldn't he be sent to a hospital?" Glenda asked.

Bill hadn't known Glenda was in the

room. He turned his head, trying to see her.

"Perhaps he should," the lieutenant agreed. "And I think he will be. I haven't told you all the story. When he left the morgue after identifying the girl's body he ran into a man whom he insists was also here last night. He hit the man and knocked him out. The police arrested the man, for it seems he was carrying a gun. The fellow's at the police station, now. Hopkins, unfortunately, got away."

* * *

SAM GARVIN scowled. He twisted his hands together. "They'll probably question that man like they did me, won't they," he muttered. "It isn't right, lieutenant. It isn't fair."

Bainbridge shrugged. "Maybe not. Yes, they'll question him, all right. In fact, the police will probably give him quite a grilling. You know, this case does have its funny aspects."

"Funny?"

"Yes, funny. For instance, Hopkins described this room perfectly, even to the design in the carpet and the pictures on the wall. Yet you say he was never here. There's something else I've been thinking about, too. He said that when he was sitting on the davenport with the girl he called Glenda he ran his hand down between the cushions and discovered a paper folder of matches which someone had left there. He said he put them back. I just now remembered it. I wonder—"

Bainbridge turned around and walked over to the davenport. He stooped over and reached between the cushions and then straightened up, holding a paper folder of matches in his hands. Bill didn't know what to make of this. He hadn't told Bainbridge any such story at all. He took a quick look at Sam Garvin. Garvin had drawn a gun. There was a tight, strained look on his face.

"Here they are," Bainbridge was saying. "What do you know about that. I—"

He turned and faced Garvin and his voice broke off as he saw the gun in Garvin's hand.

"You talk too much, lieutenant," Garvin said flatly. "Maybe you'd better get your hands up. Glenda, call Matt, and

then get out of here. You and Alice, both. You know where to go."

Bainbridge didn't look at all frightened. He lifted his arms. "You'll have to hurry it," he said to Garvin. "It won't be long until some of the boys will be here. And you've got to run a long ways. You'll never be safe in this country and if you get to Germany you'll not be safe there, long. We're moving in, you know."

Sam Garvin moistened his lips. Bill heard Glenda calling Matt. He didn't move. Garvin didn't say anything more and neither did Bainbridge, but Bainbridge was edging a little closer to the man with the gun.

The heavy carpet didn't hide the sound of Matt's footsteps. He came barging into the room and over toward the lieutenant. He held a short club in one hand.

"We've got to handle this man quietly, Matt, and then get out of here," Garvin stated. "We're all washed up."

Matt half lifted his club.

Bill Hopkins came silently to his feet. He was half a dozen yards from the other three men, and for an instant none of them noticed him. He started toward them. Garvin was the first to see him. The man stiffened and cried out a warning. His gun jerked toward Bill and at the same instant Bill saw Bainbridge step in toward the man and chop down at his wrist.

He heard the roar of a shot. Matt was jerking around toward him now. Bill lunged forward, thrusting the cane out straight in front of him as though it were a sword. The blunt point of it caught Matt in the chest and staggered him backwards.

* * *

BAINBRIDGE and Garvin were mixing it. The lieutenant was handling himself pretty well. He was chopping Garvin down. Bill had a notion he didn't have to worry about Bainbridge, but just the same he owed a good deal to Garvin so he straightened up and broke the cane over Garvin's head. After that he plowed in and took on Matt. He only had to hit Matt a few times. The jab from the cane had taken all the fight out of the fellow.

Bainbridge was in the hall by the time

Bill had finished. He had drawn a gun and was herding Glenda and Alice into the room.

"Nice work, Bill," said the lieutenant, looking down at Matt. "But you didn't have to bust in on my party, did you?"

Bill mopped a hand over his face.

"You'd been in a swell fix if I hadn't been here," he offered.

"Maybe I knew you were here. Maybe I figured you wouldn't come down to the office. Maybe I came over here and saw you drive up in a taxi."

"And those matches you palmed and pulled from the davenport?"

"Haven't you ever played poker, Bill?"

Bill grinned wearily.

"Don't get us wrong, Bill," the lieutenant said. "We fellows don't go for every story which comes our way, but we check every damned one mighty thoroughly. Before we had finished with this nian who calls himself Allerton or Garvin we would have known everything about him from his favorite food to the color of his pajamas. Already I can tell you he writes the commercials for a radio program his company puts on five nights a week. I think his tips to the submarine wolf packs go out that way."

Garvin was sitting up, holding his head, cursing. The woman who was supposed to be his wife said something to him in a language Bill thought was German. She sounded disgusted. Glenda looked awfully pale.

"Go find a phone, Bill, and call my office," Bainbridge suggested. "Ask for Lieutenant Stauffer and tell him what's happened. He'll know what to do."

"Stauffer's not that doctor, is he?" Bill asked.

"No. Why?"

"Because I don't intend to take any chances with any doctors," Bill answered. "Maybe it's true that I'm suffering from shock but I can cure it myself."

"How, Bill?"

Bill Hopkins grinned. "By going back to sea. I'm going to sign on tomorrow. I've been ashore long enough."

"But what about tonight?" Bainbridge asked. "I know a couple of girls who—"

Bill looked over at Glenda and shook his head. "Not a chance this trip. What I want tonight is a good book."

THE END

BLACKED OUT

A Short Short Story



He bore down on the bridge.

by **AVERY JOHNSON**

It takes cleverness to commit a murder and frame it—successfully—on Uncle Sam!

THE thunder of the passing train faded slowly away. Its roar had masked the sound of the shot. He hid the rifle and the heavy gloves in the place he had prepared for them, and walked swiftly back to his car. It was parked between the highway and the railroad tracks, where a dip and turn in the road made a thick shadow.

"I hope you're warm enough, dear," he said to his wife as he slid under the wheel. "You mustn't become chilled. Someone might notice."

He started the engine and made sure the

heater was on full force. He unbuttoned his own coat and loosened his scarf.

"It's infernally hot in here," he said, "but I'd rather burn now than later." He laughed at his own joke, but his wife made no response.

She had been dead for several minutes.

"Time to go," he said. "The blackout has started, my dear. Hear the sirens?"

He did not turn on his headlights immediately as he reversed the car and started back. He did not wish to attract attention at once, and he knew this road well enough to drive over it without headlights. He met no other cars. He drove along at a good clip, getting nearer and nearer the bridge where the railroad and the highway crossed the river together.

"Only a few more minutes, my dear," he said, "and everything will be official."

They had come to the edge of the fort now. An old stone wall, relic of Indian fighting days, here ran parallel to the road. He knew that at intervals along its length, sentries must be posted. He switched on his headlights full force. That should attract notice. He would have the witnesses he wanted.

* * *

"YOU have—I mean had—a very clever husband, my dear," he said. "Too bad you insisted on nagging him, and then refusing him money at the last minute. A self-respecting man cannot have his wife reproaching him for the use he makes of her money, but he can overlook it if she doesn't withdraw his credit along with her confidence. And if she does withdraw his credit, she shouldn't ride out toward a country roadhouse with him on the night of a blackout test."

He laughed softly and increased his speed still more. He was almost to the bridge now. Already he could see a detachment of troops hurrying toward it. They would not be in time, though. When he reached the bridge only one man would be there to stop him—one of the civilian guards hired by the railroad company. A bunch of kids they were, too young for the draft, and quick on the trigger, as had been proved several times.

He swept past the knot of men who had just come to the edge of the road. Shouts

of "Halt!" reached him. He bore down on the bridge without slackening speed.

The guard held his ground and waved his gun back and forth.

The husband switched off his lights, gave a cheerful salute on his horn, swerved and passed him by.

"Halt, or I'll fire!"

He drove on across the bridge. There was a long worried moment, and then just as he was about to give up hope, there was the sound of a rifle shot behind him. He pulled over to the side of the road and jumped out to face the advancing man.

"What's the idea?" he demanded loudly. "You've frightened my wife half to death."

"What do you mean by driving in a blackout with your lights on?" shouted the sentry, panting. He stopped a few feet away and leveled his gun again. "Why didn't you stop when I signaled you?"

"Weren't you telling me about the blackout? I turned off my lights, didn't I?"

"Why didn't you stop?"

"How was I to know I had to stop for you? This is still a free country, isn't it?"

"Ask your wife to step out of the car, too," said the guard.

"She'll back up everything I say," declared the driver. He went around to her side of the car and opened the door. The detachment of soldiers had arrived now.

"Come, my dear—"

His voice broke off in a silence as sudden and surprising as he could make it.

"Come around here and give me a hand, some of you," he said, after a moment. "I think my wife's fainted."

They got her out of the car and laid her on the edge of the road. He knelt beside her, chafing her wrists in agonized fashion.

"Get a doctor, somebody! Can't you see my wife's fainted?"

The lieutenant pushed him gently away, took his place and felt for her pulse.

"The doctor won't be needed."

"What do you mean?" asked the husband with a trembling voice. "Is she—"

The officer nodded. The husband jumped to his feet.

"You did it!" he shouted at the sentry, who was pale with excitement. "You frightened her to death— Well, perhaps you're not really to blame. Her heart was

always weak and I have always worried—"

"Heart attack, nothing," snapped the lieutenant, who had been continuing his examination. "This woman has been shot through the throat."

"You did it!" The husband pointed a trembling finger at the sentry. "You're not even a soldier. You, with that gun of yours. It wasn't given you to kill innocent—" His voice broke hysterically.

"But I—" the sentry protested. The husband gave him no chance to say more.

"I suppose you're going to say that you fired in the air! That's what all you irresponsible young fools are saying when you fire on innocent citizens who are going about their own business. You're much too zealous about your guard duty. Only last week a man was nearly killed here."

The lieutenant addressed the sentry directly, "Which did you fire, your rifle or your automatic?"

"My rifle, sir," said the boy eagerly.

THE officer, ignoring him, walked around to the back of the car. Checking up, of course, to see if the bullet hole was there. The husband sank down on the runningboard and hid his triumphant face in his hands.

"Here's the bullet hole all right," came the officer's voice, crisp in the night air. "Guess we'd better take him into custody."

"I should hope so." He was up on his

feet in an instant and around to the back of the car, where the officer was sighting with a flashlight through the bullet hole in the rear window.

"My poor dear wife, to die like that. Why couldn't it have been me?"

"It may be you a little later," the lieutenant said. "Take charge of him, men."

"What do you think you're doing?" He fought hard for control as the hands of the soldiers closed on his wrists.

"We'll take care of you while we investigate this a little further," said the lieutenant.

"Investigate? What more do you need to investigate? There's the hole in the car, there's the gun with one shot gone. There's my poor wife. What more do you want?"

"We want to know where the shot was fired that killed your wife," answered the lieutenant equably, "and we want to find what gun it came from."

"But—"

"You see," the lieutenant went on, "I believe this guard when he says he fired into the air. And in any case he couldn't have killed your wife. Ever since the nearly fatal shooting last week—which probably gave you the idea for what you did tonight—the civilian guards at this bridge haven't been issued loaded rifles. Their pistols have live ammunition, yes, but their rifles don't carry anything but blanks."

THE WAY OF THE HELL-DIVERS!

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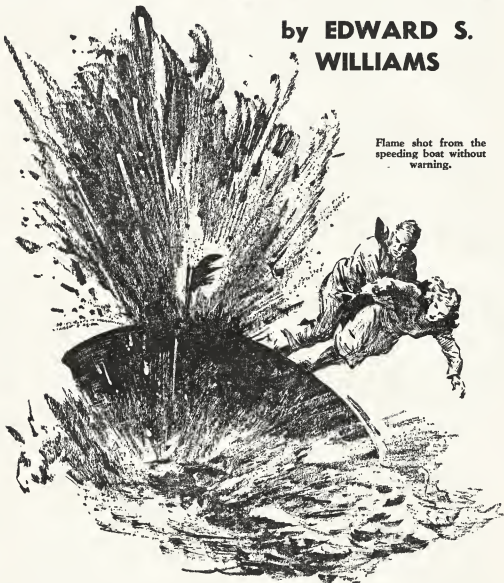
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10 **BATTLE
D-BIRDS**

The Devil Has A Pitchfork

by EDWARD S.
WILLIAMS

Flame shot from the
speeding boat without
warning.



When one frightful accident after another mysteriously threatened the life of Joan Abbott, her fiance swapped bomb-rack for pitchfork in a life and death battle to protect her.

THE scream came from the direction of the barns. It was a man's hoarse cry of pain and terror. Faint in the distance, nevertheless that sound froze them until Alec McDonald came to his

feet, drawing Joan Abbott with him.

Joan cried, "Dad! . . . Come on, Alec!" and caught his hand as they ran down the terrace steps together.

Rodney Starr burst out of a side door

of the house after they had passed it.

"What is it, Joan?" he called.

"I don't know, Rod," Joan answered her cousin. "But it's at the barns. Dad's down there."

Starr caught them before they'd reached the cluster of big barns and silos. That agonized cry was not repeated, but they heard other shouting, excited voices. And there was a weird animal bellowing, a squealing, snarling, grunting.

Starr panted, "That damned boar, Joan! He's out. He's hurt somebody."

McDonald said, "The Tamworth boar? That big red pig your father showed me today?"

"Yes," Joan answered. "Oh, Alec—Rod—hurry! It may be Dad! With his bad heart the excitement might kill him even though the boar didn't."

They reached the barn that housed Martin Abbott's prize thoroughbred pigs and ran inside. But it was not Abbott who lay groaning, bleeding, in the concrete aisle between the rows of pens.

Joan's father held a bloody pitchfork in his hand. They saw him lunge out with it, then slam shut the heavy gate of the Tamworth boar's pen. The huge red animal was raging. He attacked the timbers with the fury of a maddened bull. The curved, wickedly sharp tusks that framed his snout were red-tinged, dripping. Blood oozed from pitchfork wounds on his thick neck and shoulders.

* * *

RALPH HUBBARD, overseer of Martin Abbott's thousand-acre farm, lay on the floor, his legs terribly gashed. Milo Brean, one of the farm-hands, clung to the top rail of a nearby pen. His face was ashen. It was to him that Martin Abbott turned when the boar was again imprisoned.

His square, iron-jawed face dark with anger, Abbott jerked the farm-hand down into the aisle. He smashed his fist full into Brean's face, flooring him. Thickly Abbott roared,

"Damn you, Brean, I told you to put a new latch on that gate. Get off this place and stay off. You're fired! . . . Come here, Rod, Alec. Help me get Hubbard to the—"

Then Martin Abbott sagged loosely. His choleric face went gray. His mouth twisted in apparent agony. Both hands clawed at his chest, over his heart, and he went heavily to his knees. He toppled sidewise and lay motionless.

Joan screamed and flung herself down beside her father. Rodney Starr hesitated between his uncle and the bleeding overseer. Alec McDonald whipped off his own necktie and used it as a tourniquet on one of Hubbard's legs. His belt served for the other. And Harriet Holt arrived—beautiful, calm, and cool as ever in spite of her panting—as Alec finished and rose.

Without a word Martin Abbott's special nurse pushed Joan aside and knelt over Abbott. She had come prepared. In Harriet Holt's hand was a cased hypodermic needle. Skilfully and swiftly she assembled it, filled it from a vial in the case. She plunged the point into Abbott's arm.

Milo Brean had got up, reeling. Blood seeped from his nose, trickled from lips that Martin Abbott's fist had crushed. A killing rage burned in the farm-hand's eyes.

"I'll get him for this!" he choked. "If he ain't already dead, I'll get him. An' if he is I'll still get revenge for that punch! It wasn't my fault that damn' hog got out. Just wait, blast you, an' see!"

The overseer, Hubbard, moaned feebly, "Don't go makin' threats like that, Milo. If you'd had the gate fixed, like Mr. Abbott said, this wouldn't have—"

"Just wait!" Brean mouthed. "You'll all see!" He jerked about and went out of the barn.

Martin Abbott stirred weakly. The nurse said coldly, "Get him to the house, please . . . Joan, I should think you, of all people, would know that your father's heart will not stand such excitement. You know he shouldn't have come down here. Do you want to kill him?"

Joan flashed, "Before I see him marry you—yes, you mercenary—" Then she bit her lip and sobbed.

Alec McDonald said to Rodney Starr, "Let's get them to the house, Rod, and get a doctor."

* * *

Lieutenant Alec McDonald sat alone on the dark terrace, and smoked. It was two

A.M., but he couldn't sleep. The tension was back in him again, the wondering, the doubts. His face, lean and deeply tanned from his months of duty on a Hawaii-based aircraft carrier, was troubled.

For more than a year he had dreamed of this reunion with Joan. But now that it was a reality, a great many things had happened to mar it.

Joan was at dagger's-point with Harriet Holt, her father's nurse. She was convinced that the Holt woman was trying to maneuver Martin Abbott into marrying her. And from what Alec himself had observed, Joan might be right.

Harriet Holt was undeniably beautiful. She was a divorcee; nearing forty, Alec judged. But her profuse dark hair was untouched with gray; her face and figure were those of a much younger woman. She was McDonald thought, utterly unscrupulous. Every one, it seemed, except Martin Abbott, saw the wedge that Harriet Holt was driving between Joan and her father. With consummate skill the nurse was making herself indispensable to the ailing industrialist.

It had been Harriet Holt's idea, Joan had told Alec, that Martin Abbott should retire to his country place—where the nurse could make Abbott even more dependent on her than ever.

And there was Rod Starr, Joan's cousin. He was a lawyer. Since Abbott's forced retirement, Rodney Starr had taken over the management of his uncle's affairs.

Alec couldn't justify his distaste for Starr, even to himself. Certainly Rod Starr hadn't done anything to arouse hostility. He was seemingly eager to make Alec's short leave a pleasant one. Yet there was a cold reserve to the man that Alec found it impossible to penetrate. It was as though Starr thought him not quite good enough to marry Joan.

Alec lighted another tasteless cigarette.

* * *

HE HAD no money. He had been a naval flyer when he'd met Joan in Honolulu, just before Pearl Harbor. Alec hadn't known, when he'd asked Joan to marry him, and she'd ac-

cepted, that she was the heir to Martin Abbott's millions.

The war had prevented an immediate marriage. For a year and a half, Alec had not even seen Joan. He wondered now if she also felt as Rod Starr did—if she regretted her whirlwind courtship and engagement?

But certainly Joan had been as sweet and lovable as ever. She wore Alec's ring. Her father seemed as pleased as ever with the idea of Alec as a son-in-law. Yet there was a tension in all of them that was clouding Alec's vacation with gnawing doubts.

Again he flung away a half-smoked cigarette. He rose restlessly, then stood rigid, listening to faint thudding, hammering sounds from somewhere in the house. Muffled, distorted by sound-proof walls, came a man's shout for help.

Alec sprinted through the open front doors and up the stairs. At the top he collided with a running man. It was Peters, the Abbotts' butler.

"What's wrong up here?" Alec demanded.

"I don't know, sir," Peters quavered. "I heard a commotion, like—like someone throwing things around—breaking things. Somebody called for help and I—"

"Mr. Abbott?" Alec cut in. "That damned farm-hand he hit—Milo Breaan! Is he—"

"No," Peters interrupted. "I looked into Mr. Abbott's room. He's asleep. Miss Holt told me she was giving him a sleeping tablet. But she's not in her room, and neither were you. I was just going to—"

Alec released the butler. He whirled to the bedroom door beside them—that of Rod Starr's room. It was unoccupied. Alec darted to the next one and flung open the door. His hand hit the light switch. He swore and lunged on toward the bed. Peters followed.

"Lord!" the butler gasped. "Miss Joan! Is she—"

"Find the nurse," Alec snapped. "Hurry!"

"Yes, sir," Peters vanished.

The room was a wreck. Joan's vanity table was overturned, its mirror smashed. The bench lay on its side with two of its legs broken. A chaise-longue was upset.

Rodney Starr lay sprawled in the middle of the room, his forehead oozing blood from an ugly bruise. But Alec gave Starr and the room only a glance.

Joan lay on the bed, ghastly pale and motionless. The bed clothes were twisted and rumpled. Joan was unconscious, but still alive. Alec's fingers caught the faint beat of pulse in her wrist. Then Starr groaned and rolled over on his face.

Alec's eyes jerked toward the prone man, watched Starr come to hands and knees and shake his head. He heaved himself up with a wild light in his eyes, muttering, "Get him! He's out there! He— Oh, it's you, Alec—"

Starr turned and reeled toward an open window across the room. One of its drapes was torn down and lay across the sill. The hinged screen was open, its lock broken. Rod Starr peered out, bracing himself with both hands on the sill.

"He went that way," Starr pointed into the night, and turned. "Joan! Is she—"

"I think Joan has just fainted, but what—"

"No," Starr sank wearily down on the sill. "She didn't just faint. I was worried about Uncle Martin. Couldn't sleep. I started downstairs for a drink and heard a disturbance in here. I came in and— Alec, it was awful! A man—I didn't recognize him in the dark—was holding a pillow over Joan's face. Smothering her! Murdering her! I—"

Then Joan stirred. Alec caught her hand and she tried to pull away from him. She sobbed terrorized, unintelligible words. Alec held her, calling her name. Joan finally recognized him, and clung to him.

"Oh, Alec—Alec," she whimpered. "I woke up and—and someone was holding a pillow over my face. I couldn't breathe. I—I—" her frantic words sobbed again into unintelligibility.

Alec held her close. "It's all right now, Joan," he said. "Rod heard you and came in time. The fellow slugged Rod and got away, but we'll get him. Relax, Honey."

Rodney Starr spoke two words, low, between clenched teeth. "Milo Brean!"

"You can identify him?" Alec asked grimly. "Positively?"

"No-o. But after what he said when

Uncle Martin hit him, I—well—I just—"

Alec nodded. Joan tensed again in his arms. "Dad!" she cried. "Is he—"

"Your father," Harriet Holt said from the doorway, "is still asleep. Fortunately your—hysterics—haven't awakened him. What happened? Did you have a bad dream?"

* * *

THEY turned to look at her. The nurse was dressed in dark slacks, sport shoes, a sweater. Her shoes, and the bottoms of her slacks, were wet. Alec's eyes flashed to the rug beside the bed.

"I've been for a walk," she added, as though sensing the question in Alec's mind. "I was unable to sleep. May I ask what all the new excitement is about? Peters didn't seem to know."

Joan said, "If my father is all right, that's all you need concern yourself about, Miss Holt."

But Rod Starr shook his head. "No, Joan, I think she ought to know . . . Harriet, somebody tried to kill Joan. A man. He got away through the window when I heard Joan's struggles and came in. He hit me with that vanity bench and knocked me out. But if you were outside you might have seen him. Did you?"

The nurse's icy composure was shaken momentarily. "Tried to—kill Joan!" she gasped. "No. I saw no one. But—Milo Brean," she whispered. "Would he dare?"

Alec's mind grasped at one item. Harriet Holt had been outside. The house was surrounded by broad lawns. There was a heavy fall of dew, for the nurse's shoes were saturated. It was an easy climb—for a woman as strong and agile as Harriet Holt—up ivy-clad stones to Joan's window. But wouldn't anyone who made that climb, and entered the room, have left wet footprints on the pale green broadloom rug? Yet there were no such footprints there.

Another thought followed inevitably. Harriet Holt was statuesquely built; no doubt she was stronger than the average woman. And she wore slacks. Could she have tried to murder Joan? Could she have been the "man" Rod Starr thought

he saw, and got her shoes wet *after* she escaped through the window?

Harriet Holt hated Joan. That was apparent. Joan's influence with her father was still strong. And Joan was Martin Abbott's sole heir. Aside from Starr, Alec knew of no other close relatives. Knowing of Milo Brean's threat against the Abbotts, and knowing that the farm-hand would be suspected, could Harriet Holt have tried to remove Joan—the greatest obstacle to her conquest of Martin Abbott and the Abbott millions?

Harriet Holt, regarding him calmly, said, "I'll dress that bruise for you, Rod. Then I think we'd better notify the sheriff. But please—all of you—not a word of this to Mar— Mr. Abbott."

Starr nodded distractedly. "I'll phone Sheriff Adams now."

* * *

Alec awoke with a start.

He came out of deep slumber with a sense of terrible urgency, and of guilt for having slept at all. Milo Brean had escaped them. Joan was in danger—and he had gone to sleep!

Then full memory returned and Alec relaxed again. He glanced at his watch. It was 9:30. Actually, there was no reason why he should not have slept, for Sheriff Adams had left a deputy on guard. McDonald lay thinking of the events of the night. . . .

A trail of running footprints away from the house, had been plain in the dew-laden grass. There was a sprinkling of ivy leaves beneath Joan's window. But the prints in the grass had been too blurred for identification of the shoes that had made them. The sheriff's patient and efficient search for fingerprints had yielded none but Joan's, and those of house servants, in her room.

Without making any accusations, Alec had told the sheriff of the tension between Joan and Harriet Holt. He had pointed out the fact that there were no wet footprints in Joan's room. And the sheriff had said non-committally,

"I noticed that, lieutenant. But don't forget that Brean knew this place well. There's only a one-way set of prints across the lawn—going, not coming. Brean could have come down the driveway and got in the house through the back door. It was

unlocked, because Miss Holt says she went out that way. I'm not overlooking *her*, but I want to get hold of Milo Brean before I make any moves. He's got a reputation here for a devilish bad temper. That'll be all now, lieutenant. Thanks."

Then they had waited. The car that had finally swept to a halt at the rear of the house had brought them all together again in the library.

Two deputies brought in Milo Brean. His eyes were puffed. His mouth was swollen. He stood mute and sullen under the sheriff's questioning. But one of the deputies supplied the answers.

"We caught him, sheriff, just as he was gettin' home. He said he'd been coon-huntin'."

"Did he have his dogs with him?" Sheriff Adams asked.

"Well, yeah. But he said he'd been out alone. He's got no alibi. He could have tied his dogs out somewhere and—"

* * *

THEN Milo Brean spoke. In a fierce frenzy he yelled, "I ain't been near this place since Abbott hit me! Anybody that says I tried to kill Miss Joan lies! If you wanta know who did it, ask *her*. He pointed at Harriet Holt. "She wants t'get her hooks into old man Abbott's bankroll had enough t'do anything! Ask Miss Joan about that."

"Or ask *him*!" Brean whirled to point at Rod Starr. "He knows that with Miss Joan dead *he'd* get most o' the dough when the old man kicks off. He knows—"

Starr's face darkened with rage. Then it had happened.

Starr had thrown himself at Brean, his fists clenched. The two deputies had moved forward to intercept him. And Milo Brean whirled, sprinted through the door and was gone before Sheriff Adams could draw his gun. . . .

McDonald thought of all that while he showered and dressed. He went downstairs and found Harriet Holt alone at the breakfast table. She was in riding habit. Save for the butler, none of the rest of the household were in evidence.

The nurse laid her cool, appraising glance on Alec. "Good morning, lieutenant," she said. "Will you have breakfast

with me—in Joan's absence?"

"Thanks." Alec sat down. "I'll have coffee, Peters, and whatever else is ready."

"Yes, sir," the butler responded. "Bacon and eggs, lieutenant?"

Alec nodded. Harriet Holt laughed mockingly. "You don't hide your thoughts very well, Alec. But I assure you it was not I who tried to kill your charming fiancée—"

"How's Mr. Abbott?" Alec countered brusquely.

The nurse dropped her eyes for the first time. She set down her empty coffee cup and rose. "Fortunately," she said, "he slept through the night. If we can keep this from him until Milo Brean is recaptured, perhaps the shock will not be so great. I'm interested in keeping *him* alive, you see, as well as Joan."

Alec ignored with an effort the implied slur against himself and Joan. He said, "Where is she, by the way?"

"Joan? Why, on the river in her speedboat. She, at least, lets nothing interfere with her pleasures."

Again he ignored a slur. He half rose. "Is she alone?"

"No. Rod insisted on going along, after Joan had refused to obey the sheriff's request that she stay in the house . . . I'll see you at luncheon, lieutenant."

She went out. Watching her, Alec thought of a cat—a strong, dark, beautiful jungle-cat. He thought of that lithe tall figure in slacks and a sweater. And again the conviction was in his mind that it would have been easy to mistake Harriet Holt for a man last night. . . . He finished his breakfast and wandered restlessly out to the terrace that faced the lake.

The sound of a motor drew his eyes. Alec saw the boat, a long, low runabout with a fan of spray on either side of its high-riding cutwater. Joan was at the wheel with Rodney Starr beside her. The boat was headed in—and suddenly Alec McDonald cried out hoarsely.

Without warning, with no preliminary smoke, flame shot from the speeding boat. The closed foredeck hatch over the motor, exploded upward, spewing a sheet of fire. The craft veered crazily. Alec saw Starr grab Joan and go overboard.

It had happened in an instant, while

Alec stood frozen with fear. He knew Joan could not swim the remaining distance to shore. He didn't know whether Starr could swim at all. Alec vaulted the terrace rail and sprinted toward the distant boathouse. Behind him he heard the pounding footsteps of the deputy sheriff who had been left on guard.

There was a skiff with an outboard motor tied at the boathouse pier. Alec wound the starter cord with fingers that seemed all thumbs. He yanked the rope. The cold motor coughed—and caught.

The speedboat was enveloped in flame when the skiff drew close. Alec could see neither Joan nor Starr. Then the Deputy in the bow yelled hoarsely.

"There they are! Swing her left, lieutenant!"

Alec saw them simultaneously. Rod Starr was swimming strongly toward the oncoming skiff, carrying Joan. Swiftly the small motor cut down the distance between them. Starr reached up and caught the gunwale as the skiff drew alongside. His voice was grim in spite of his reassurance.

"Joan's okay," Starr panted. "She lost her head and darned near drowned us both. I had to clip her one. . . . But that boat was tampered with, Alec."

Alec did not respond. He lifted Joan's limp body out of the water. The deputy sheriff helped Starr in and started the skiff shoreward. It was he who asked,

"Are you sure of that, Mr. Starr? Can you prove it?"

* * *

"WITH the boat burned to the water-line?" Starr said, pointing to the still blazing wreck. "No, we can't prove it now. But the motor started heating up within a few minutes. That's why we were coming back. Maybe the crank-case was drained. Anyway, something was done to the motor, and when it got hot enough, the gas fumes in the motor compartment exploded."

Joan stirred in Alec's arms. She regained consciousness quickly and tried to sit up. Alec still held her.

"Take it easy, Joan," he counseled. "We'll soon be ashore."

"I'm all right, Alec," she smiled at him faintly, then shuddered. "Oh, Alec, do you think somebody—did something to the boat? Tried again to—to kill me?"

Alec hesitated to tell her.

Starr said, "Much as I hate to think it, Joan—I do. You have simply got to stay in the house, under guard, until we get Milo Breaan—or whoever is behind these murderous attempts. I'm going to phone New York for a detective."

"You're right, Rod," Joan said. "If it weren't for you I'd be dead now, I guess. I'm sorry I was so bull-headed about taking the boat out."

"Oh, forget it," Starr said. "After all, Joan, we've been more like brother and sister than cousins. Uncle Martin couldn't have been kinder to me if I'd been his son. . . ."

When Alec carried Joan to the house, Joan whispered, "Please, Alec, keep on loving me. This has been a hellish homecoming for you, I know, what with Dad and that Holt woman—and now this—"

Alec's arms tightened around her. He smiled, all doubts gone. "Will you marry me now, Joan," he asked, "tomorrow—before I go back?"

"Yes!" she answered. "Today, Alec!"

Then they were in the house. Alec called for the nurse, but it was Peters, the butler, who answered.

"Miss Holt went to the barns, lieutenant, right after she left you at breakfast. She usually rides for an hour every morning. . . . But the boat, sir! That was a narrow escape, Miss Joan. Thank God you weren't hurt!"

"And thanks to Rod," Joan said. "Take me to my room, please, Alec. I'll be all right after I rest a while."

Alec left her there and came downstairs. Starr joined him on the terrace after he had changed to dry clothes.

He said grimly, "Alec, this is getting serious. We've got to—"

He was interrupted by the deputy who came around the corner of the house, running, his clothes dripping wet.

"Mr. Starr!" he panted hoarsely. "Lieutenant! I've found Milo Breaan! . . ."

They stood together on the platform that ran around the inside of the boat-house. The corpse of Milo Breaan lay at their feet. Breaan had been tied under-

water, by the neck and feet, to the boat-house pilings. But it must have been a hurried job, for the rope at the neck had worked loose and the head had risen. The deputy, already wet, had ducked under the shoulder-deep water to release the dead farm-hand's feet.

Alec said, "He wasn't drowned. He was dead before he was tied down there. That's why his head came up—there was no water in his lungs."

Starr nodded. He knelt over the body and turned the head. "Here it is, Alec," he pointed to a pulpy bruise on the back of the head. "He was hit with something heavy. But why? If it wasn't Breaan who was trying to kill Joan, in heaven's name who is it?"

Alec stared narrowly down at the dead face of Milo Breaan. Again his mind returned to one curious circumstance: the lack of any wet footprints last night on Joan's bedroom rug. He thought again of Harriet Holt, in slacks, her shoes dripping wet with dew.

Alec muttered, "Rod, I think Breaan was killed by whoever tampered with the motor of Joan's boat. Joan was crazy about boats. She used that runabout practically every day."

"You mean you think Breaan figured that far ahead of the rest of us? That he realized whoever was trying to kill Joan might use her boat in the next attempt? That Breaan was watching the boat-house—knowing that the best way to clear himself was to catch the real killer?"

* * *

"I DON'T know," Alec said. "But the only logical answer to his murder is that Breaan caught somebody in here fooling with that boat, and was killed for that reason. Or maybe the murderer would have figured that with Milo Breaan's complete disappearance, all suspicion would rest on Breaan. I think that person intended to return and hide the body in a better place when he—or she—had more time. And meanwhile, Joan would undoubtedly have drowned if you hadn't insisted on going with her in her boat this morning."

"Joan!" Starr cried out. "We've left her at the house—alone!"

He lurched to his feet and bolted through the open doorway. Alec started involuntarily to follow, then checked himself.

To the deputy, he said, "Wait! Starr'll look after Joan. There's something here we're missing. There's a link between the two attempts on Joan's life, and this killing. Did Harriet Holt leave the house this morning, or at any time after Brean escaped last night?"

The deputy regarded Alec blankly. "No, sir," he said finally. "She didn't go out at all. Peters—that butler—came out early. He said he was going to the barns to see about the day's supply of milk and eggs for the table. Later somebody at the barns phoned and asked Mr. Starr to come down. He went—"

"Peters!" Alec said it sharply. He remembered his encounter with Peters at the top of the stairs last night. Where had the butler been going? Why had he looked into Abbott's room, and Miss Holt's, and not Joan's? Then, suddenly, Alec cursed. His face went white. Like Rodney Starr, Alec whirled and sprinted out of the boathouse. He ran toward the house and the deputy followed, baffled, tugging at the .38 in his hip-pocket holster. . . .

Alec stormed first into the house, shouting for Starr, for Joan.

There was no answer from either. But Peters stood in the living room doorway, a bowl of fresh flowers in his hands. He dropped the bowl when Alec caught his lapels and jerked him close.

"Where's Joan?" Alec demanded. "Where's Starr?"

Peters' mouth was lax, his eyes frightened. He stammered, "M-Miss Joan went to the b-barns. Not two minutes ago. I haven't seen Mr. Starr since—"

Alec literally flung the man aside in his surge toward the doors. The winded deputy pounded up in time to see Alec disappear again. Doggedly he followed. But again he was out-distanced.

Alec was alone when he reached the outbuildings. He ran through the huge feed barn, seeing no one. He passed the horse barn and arrived at the smaller one where the prize pigs were kept—and that vicious Tamworth boar. Again he heard the boar's savage, grunting squeal.

As he flung open the door Alec's hoarse shout merged with the animal's bellowing. Joan lay in the concrete aisle, almost exactly where the injured overseer had lain last night. She was motionless, deathly quiet, and Alec's heart all but stopped.

Last evening's scene was duplicated, save for the absence of Milo Brean. In Martin Abbott's place was Rodney Starr. He held a bloody pitchfork in his hand. The gate of the red boar's pen was partly open. The boar was lunging to freedom when Alec reached it.

Together the two men hit the gate. But the boar was already half out in an irresistible eight-hundred-pound charge. Starr slipped and fell. The boar charged him.

Alec caught the pitchfork that Starr had dropped. He let the gate go. Starr screamed as the boar's tusks ripped his thigh. Alec plunged the fork deep into the red pig's hind-quarters.

Pain-crazed, the animal turned. Alec wrenched the imbedded tines free and retreated backward into the pen. The boar followed, charging. Alec reached the fence at the rear of the pen. Holding the fork in both hands he stabbed downward desperately at the on-rushing boar—and missed. The gleaming tusks struck at his legs. In a continuous sweep, Alec flung himself up and over the pig.

The handle of the fork acted as a vaulting pole. Untouched by the tusks, Alec cleared the maddened animal. He landed in the aisle, caught himself on the heavy gate and slammed it shut. The steel latch caught and held. Alec staggered back against the gate opposite. Joan sobbed and covered her face with her hands. The deputy sheriff arrived.

"Great Godfrey!" he panted. "Was that damn' hog out again? What happened? What goes on here?" He waved his gun wildly.

* * *

RODNEY STARR held his blood-spouting thigh with both hands. His face was gray, his voice jerky. "Somebody phoned Joan—from here. Asked her—come down. Slugged her—left her there—gate open. I got here in

—time again—thank God. I don't know—”

Alec knelt beside Joan, lifting her. But his eyes never left Starr. His voice was steady. “Is that true, Joan?” he asked.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“You were unconscious?”

“Until just now—when I woke up and saw you fighting that boar.”

Alec's eyes blazed, and Starr saw his slip too late. Alec said, “Then how did you know all that, Starr? If Joan was lying there unconscious, how did she tell you someone phoned her from here? Arrest him,” Alec flung at the gaping deputy. “He killed Brean. He tried to kill Miss Abbott. He planned—”

Rodney Starr's hand went to his pocket of his coat. But his hand was dripping with his own blood. His gun slipped out of his grip. Starr threw himself after it.

The deputy remembered his own .38. It cracked once and bucked in his hand. Starr stiffened, on hands and knees, reaching for his own weapon. Then the .38 roared again. Starr collapsed, face down.

Joan fainted. Alec carried her out of the barn. . . .

* * *

“I can see,” Sheriff Adams agreed, “Starr's scheme. After two apparent attempts on Joan's life—from which Starr alone rescued her—no one would suspect him when she finally was killed. Only one thing bothers me—those one-way tracks in the grass.”

Alec said, “He made those tracks himself, ahead of time. Starr must have seen Miss Holt go out last night. He was clever enough to see that if Milo Brean should have a good alibi, then Miss Holt would be suspected—if the tracks were one way only, away from the house.”

“By George,” the sheriff said, “that's right! If Brean was alibied it would have had to be someone from the house.”

“Right. Then Starr smothered Joan unconscious and staged his phony fight. He had the guts to hit himself a convincing wallop on the head. Just as he had the nerve to risk being burned when he went out with Joan in the boat.”

“And Brean—poor devil,” the sheriff went on, “was hanging around, trying to clear himself, and must have seen Starr tampering with the boat.”

“That,” Alec said, “was a break for

Starr. And after he killed Brean, Starr turned even the discovery of Brean's body to good use. He knew Harriet Holt had gone to the barns to get a horse and go riding. He heard Peters say so when we brought Joan back after the boat burned. So, on the pretense of going back to guard Joan, he went to the barns and phoned the house, asking her to come down. Probably he talked through a handkerchief. At any rate, she didn't recognize his voice. But she went.

“Starr slugged her from behind, opened the boar's pen, and planned to rush up to the house and “discover” that she was at the barns. Then, by the time we got to the barn, the boar would have—killed her. And Harriet Holt would be under overwhelming suspicion. But I saw the possible answer just a couple of minutes too soon for Starr.”

Alec paused. The sheriff prompted again, “You mean—?”

“That it had to be someone from the Abbott household all the way through. And only two people here had any real motive for murdering Joan. Miss Holt, to remove Joan's objections to her shanghaiing Mr. Abbott into some sort of a marriage-of-convenience. And Starr, because next to Joan he stood to inherit the bulk of Abbott's wealth.

“Milo Brean pointed that out last night, you'll remember. And Starr nearly went berserk then. But something your deputy told me eliminated Miss Holt.”

“What was that?”

“He said the—lady—hadn't been out of the house since Brean escaped. But Peters had been to the barns, and so had Starr. Peters had no apparent motive for murder. Starr did. It was just luck that I saw it in time.”

“But something more than luck,” the sheriff said, “that you got that boar back into his pen. . . . How's Mr. Abbott taking it, by the way?”

“Good,” Alec smiled. “He heard the shooting, of course, and we had to tell him. He's agreed to go back to town with us, and to find another nurse. Mrs. McDonald and I both think a small apartment might be less exciting for him.”

“Mrs. McDonald! So *that's* who it was who drove off when I came in!”

“Yep,” Alec grinned. “The preacher.”



WHEN GANGDOM RULED

AN ILLUSTRATED CHRONICLE OF THE TURBULENT TWENTIES BY WINDAS

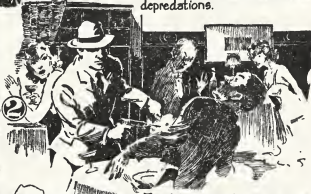


When Organized Crime spread its vice and corruption from coast to coast, its most vicious asset was its ability to so intimidate witnesses that a criminal was rarely brought to book for his misdeeds.

Take the case of the Rinksi brothers. This notorious pair was arrested eleven times for crimes ranging from mail-theft to murder.

At all eleven trials witnesses shrank from identifying them, so the thugs were released to continue their varied depredations.

Of some 5,000 cases of homicide in Chicago, less than two hundred criminals paid the price of slaying. Brenda Scillassi, and a score of other big shots went blithely on their way, their gun-belts decorated to the trigger-guards with notches that blatantly marked the passing of more victims. Scillassi openly boasted of nineteen killings, but witnesses to his crimes hid or perjured themselves, lest they too should become just another notch on his lethal weapon.



Two children were kidnaped in order to promote the right amount of "fear complex" in the infamous Kendall trial. Their parents had seen Frank Kendall's attempted getaway in which he killed a bank guard and a plucky stenographer. But the witnesses wilted under the evil threatening gaze of the bandit and refused to testify. So for the sake of the children the gunman was turned loose.

Nor were juries and witnesses the only ones intimidated. Judge C. P. Anderson lost an eye and two fingers when a "pineapple" was tossed into his breakfast room on the morning that the murder trial of Spike Woestler and Hans Gottlieb was scheduled to open. But the judge was valiant, and refused to let a colleague substitute for him on the bench. This brave act so heartened the witnesses and jury that Woestler and Gottlieb met merited punishment in the electric chair.



NEVER A DULL MURDER



by
**JACK
BRADLEY**

"And here's looking at
you, copper," the hate-
filled voice said.

A slap-happy melange of detectives and dowagers, rum, mayhem, and murder, and worse—much, much worse.

THE minute I walked into Captain Barlow's office and saw those damned newspapers spread out on his desk I knew that I was really in for it this time. His eyes had that cold, I'll-

try-to-be-fair look, and beside him Lieutenant Cronin was standing glaring at me.

"Nice publicity, Detective Dugan," Captain Barlow said softly. "Very, very nice." His stubby finger pointed to the

glaring headlines in the evening paper:

**BURGLAR GANG CAPTURED BY
LONE DETECTIVE**

The subhead in type almost as heavy, read:

**DETECTIVE DUGAN BRINGS IN
TWO OF THE MARTIN BROTHERS.
BALDY MARTIN, THE LEADER,
BADLY WOUNDED, ESCAPES.**

"Listen, captain," I said, "you shouldn't blame me for those stories. I *told* those damned reporters that the whole thing was just pure, dumb luck."

"I know. They all praised your modesty."

"I *told* the dopes that I just happened to be driving past, on my way home when I heard shots, and when those guys came running out I grabbed them before they knew what was happening. I *told* them the truth. Is it my fault that they print a lot of goo about me without my consent?"

I TURNED away and looked out of Captain Barlow's window. Directly across the street, I could see the dim, comforting glow of the back-bar lights in Benny's Tavern and I wished—oh, so much!—that I was through with this bawling-out so I could go over there for a tall, cold Cuba Libre. Suddenly I realized that Captain Barlow was speaking again. Slowly. Bitterly.

"For three long months, those crazy gunsels have been knocking off one wealthy home after another, while the whole force went crazy, wondering where they'd strike next. Lieutenant Cronin, here, for example, stood in a doorway in the rain for four hours last night, on a stoolie's tip."

"I know, sir—"

The captain's upraised hand cut me short.

"I'm glad to know that one cop, at least, had too much sense to bother standing out in the rain and the cold. *You*, Detective Dugan, you just sat in that damned joint across the street—" he waved toward Benny's Tavern—"lapping up drinks on the taxpayers' time, while your fellow officers were catching hell from the newspapers. And then, last

night, when you couldn't put any more drinks on the cuff, you got up and started home—"

"Oh, it wasn't that, sir," I corrected brightly. "My credit is always good with Benny. I just left because he was closing for the night."

Captain Barlow turned a dull, brick red. "All right!" he roared. "So, you left because he was closing. And if I could only get something on that guy, he'd close for good!"

He glared at me, then went on. "By dumb luck you make a damn fool out of every cop on the force, and now the newspapers all want to know why we don't appoint you commissioner. So we're sending you out on a special assignment this evening. Have you ever heard of the poet, Gerald Ramsey?"

I thought for a moment. "You mean that wholesale gigolo that goes around from one Ladies Club to another reading his poems?"

"That's right, Dugan. Well, Gerald is giving a reading tonight at the home of his current sponsor, Mrs. Harriet Wilkinson. And Mrs. Wilkinson is the wife of the publisher of the *RECORD*, the only sheet in town that's ever given us a break. So, I'd lay off that gigolo stuff, if I were you, Dugan. Gerald wants you to guard the meeting and I've given my consent. They're waiting out in the hallway, now. Will you show them in, lieutenant?"

I saw a diabolic gleam in Lieutenant Cronin's eye as he left the office and, before I could think of anything to say he was back again, bowing in my two headaches.

Mrs. Harriet Wilkinson might have been anywhere from forty-five on up and she weighed in the neighborhood of three hundred pounds. But it was Gerald that caught my eye.

He was a slender little man—that last word was sheer flattery—and he had the cutest marcel wave that I'd ever seen. He looked around Captain Barlow's office, his slender hands fluttering nervously until he spotted me. Then he came forward with a delicate little rush.

"So this is the famous Detective Dugan!" he said. "I've heard *so* much about you, officer. And I'm *so* glad that you're going to be present at our poetry soiree,

"Our Dear Boy is so nervous with all these burglaries," Mrs. Wilkinson trilled. "He's really been insistent that we have police protection."

"You can rest assured that you will have complete protection, Mrs. Wilkinson," Captain Barlow boomed out. "You have made a wise choice in asking for Detective Dugan. He is—ahem—our most efficient officer. He will be at your home this evening at eight o'clock."

They stood there chatting for a while about the crime wave and then Mrs. Wilkinson went out, with Dear Boy trailing her. Far down the hallway I heard a shrill whistle from one of our less refined cops, as Gerald swished past. That would be Grogan, I thought. Lucky, lucky Grogan. All he had to do was stand out on a street crossing, directing traffic for eight hours. I turned slowly back and looked at Captain Barlow.

"Listen, Captain," I said desperately. "You can't do this to me. You just can't!"

"But I am, Dugan," he assured me. "You've pushed that damned luck of yours a little too far this time."



A FEW minutes later I was in Benny's Tavern with a tall, cold Cuba Libre in my hand. It was so quiet and cool and peaceful in here and the lights gleamed so soothingly against the bottles on the back bar. I thought why not just stay here instead of going to this wacky poetry soiree and letting the papers kid the pants off me?

And suddenly I put my glass down and stared out the window in utter disbelief. "Of all the damned nerve!" I muttered. "Right in front of the station house, itself!"

Out on the street, one of the citizens I was supposed to protect was waiting for a bus and, standing close back of him was a big, prosperous looking guy who could have passed anywhere as a business man. Only I knew damned well that he wasn't a business man.

He was the clumsiest pickpocket in all the world.

Every cop in New York knew Big Ben Shallock. Any time a detective was late

for roll call he'd stop off and pinch Big Ben as an alibi. I watched him working now.

Just as the bus drew up, Big Ben lurched clumsily against the citizen and rammed his hand into the guy's pocket. If the guy had been half awake, he'd have caught Ben, himself. As it was, I just leaned back and waited, knowing damn well that Ben would head for the nearest bar as soon as he had money.

When he came in, I walked over to him.

"All right, Ben," I said wearily. "Hand it over."

He had been staring thirstily at the rows of bottles and when I spoke his face dropped like a big, hurt kid's. Without a word of argument, he handed over the wallet he had just lifted.

"Any dip in the world, except you would know enough to ditch a leather as soon as he lifted it. Ben, you're not fitted to be a 'wire'. Why don't you give up this racket and get into something easier?"

He didn't answer, just kept staring at the bottles on the back bar and suddenly I felt sorry for the big lug. "All right, Ben, it's against regulations but you might as well have one more drink before I take you in. . . . Hey, Mack. Another Cuba Libre, here."

His face lighted up. "Gee! You're a right guy, Dugan," he said. "I've been pinched by every cop in New York and this is the first time one of them ever bought me a drink before they took me in. You know what I'm going to do for this? I'm going to tip you off to something."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Baldy Martin is looking for you, Dugan. I was up in Jordan's last night and I saw him in the booth next to me. He was talking to some guy and I heard him say that he couldn't burn more than once, and that he was going to get you before he was took in."

"You're crazy, Ben," I said weakly. "I put a slug in Baldy, last night. Right in his shoulder. He's holed up somewhere, looking for a crooked sawbones. That was somebody else you heard."

"Huh-uh. It was Baldy Martin. I wouldn't lie to you, Dugan."

"I know you wouldn't, Ben." I took a long pull at my drink and did some of the hardest thinking I'd ever done.

"Listen, Ben, did you get a good look at Baldy?"

"Oh, yes; but I didn't stick around. I don't mix with killers."

"But you *would* know him if you saw him again?"

"Sure. So what?"

"So you're going to a poetry jam session tonight. Because I didn't get a good look at Baldy last night and he's never been photographed. You go with me, keep your eyes open and I'll mail this leather you lifted back to the guy and we'll forget this rap."

I told him about Mrs. Wilkinson and her Dear Boy and I saw Big Ben's face harden, saw his thick shoulders lift.

"No dice, Dugan. If I got to take three months on the Island, I take it. But I ain't goin' to be laughed out of town. No dice!"

I reached out and grabbed his shirt front. There's also going to be another three months for resisting arrest and a lot of lumps, too. I cocked my fist and waited.

His shoulders drooped resignedly. "I'll go, I guess. But it ain't right, Dugan."

"I know it ain't right, Ben. But the things some people do to me ain't right, either. . . . Hey, Joey. Two more, here. And put a double shot of rum in mine. I gotta tough drive ahead of me."

* * *

I WASN'T kidding when I said the drive to Mrs. Wilkinson's home was a tough one. I felt my skin crawl every time a guy turned to look at me and once I damn near sent my heap into a light pole. That was when a baldheaded guy stepped out of a store and Big Ben said, "Hey!" at the same time.

"That ain't him," Big Ben said mildly. "I just yelled because you was too close to the curb."

I shoved my gun back into its holster and tooted the car over to where Ben thought it should be. "You do that just one more time," I said, "and so help me, I'll murder you." I had a nice sweat worked up by the time I rang Mrs. Wilkinson's bell.

A stiffly uniformed butler led us into the living room, where Gerald Ramsey

was giving his poetry recital. Dear Boy was standing before a mammoth fireplace, his pretty face alive under that marceled hair as he recited. Looking up adoringly at him, sat row after row of well-upholstered dowagers from the Better Circles. They sat in rapt silence as Gerald waded through something about Lilies In The Starlight—and if I ever saw a bunch of dames drool!

Then I looked again and blinked. Every last one of those dowagers were wearing enough jewelry to stock a small store. A quarter of a million was in that room; it was like looking out over a glacier field. I turned to say something to Big Ben and Big Ben wasn't there! I thought that if that big cluck had any ideas about that ice I'd damn soon get it out of his head. Then I looked over in a corner and forgot about Big Ben.

Three newspaper men were sitting together looking at me and smiling. All of them were police reporters by trade, lice by nature and mortal enemies of mine by sheer, cussed preference. I thought of what those guys would do to me in tomorrow's papers and for a moment I wished that Baldy Martin would be waiting for me outside the door, so I could get it over with.

Captain Barlow and Lieutenant Cronin were playing for keeps this time.

Finally Gerald slowed down and Mrs. Wilkinson got to her feet—which was a good trick in itself—and trilled, "And now, while our Dear Boy rests, refreshments will be served."

The same dour-faced butler came in pushing a tea cart full of glasses. I brightened as he handed one to me. I might have known better. It was some kind of highbrow wine and I set it down like it had been water.

Back of me, I heard a soft, "Psst!" and turned. Big Ben was standing in the doorway, beckoning urgently. I slipped out.

"Listen, Dugan," he said tensely. "I was prowling. Come on."

He led me back, through a couple of acres of hallways to a small pantry, the door of which dangled open. "I had a little trouble with the lock," he admitted embarrassedly. "I guess I ain't so good with locks as I am picking pockets."

The pantry was loaded with bottles. Bottles of ancient, bonded rye. Bottles of old, old wine. Bottles of nearly every kind of liquor one could name. More bottles than I had ever seen outside of a gin-mill. And, spang in the middle of the bottom shelf was a bottle of rum that was older than I was.

I looked at Big Ben and he looked at me. Then, without a word, I reached for two glasses. There wasn't anything for a mixer but with rum like that you don't need any trimmings. I just filled the two glasses—and they were both water glasses—to the brim and handed one to Big Ben.

"I've been pushed around a lot, tonight," I said, "but this rum sort of makes up for it. Here's looking at you, Ben."

"And here's looking at *you*, copper," a low, hate-filled voice back of me said.

I whirled around. An ornery looking, little bald-headed guy was standing in the doorway with an automatic trained right at my head. His eyes were hot with hatred and I didn't need a second look to know who he was. And if I had, Big Ben supplied the information.

"No good, Baldy!" he yelled. "You can't blast Dugan. He's a right guy."

The big dope plunged forward, right in my path, blocking any possible chance I might have had to nail Baldy, and I saw that automatic chop down.

* * *

I DON'T know how long I was out but it must have been several minutes because Big Ben was already stirring weakly as I opened my eyes. I felt an immense relief at knowing that the big clown hadn't been killed. That last clawing lunge of his had undoubtedly saved my life.

I got to my feet and bent over Ben, helping him up. He groaned and I turned back to the pantry. That tumblerful of rum was still half filled and I drained it down. I filled it half full again and poured it down Big Ben's throat.

I saw something sticking to his fingers as he rose, and almost without thinking I took it from him. It was only a small bit of adhesive plaster. And then I saw that it was *not* just a small bit of plaster. It was yellow on one side and white on

the other, and both sides were gummed.

I stood there for a moment, staring dully at the white and yellow strip, trying to pull my wits together. That rum was making the room go round and round and there was a dull ache where Baldy Martin's bullet had nicked me. But I was beginning to get ideas.

"What are you doing, Dugan?" Ben said weakly.

"I'm getting ready to make a damn fool out of myself, maybe," I replied. "And then, on the other hand, maybe I'm finding out how the Martin boys could case all those houses they knocked off."

"Take it easy, Dugan. That rum—" he gave a hiccup that could have been heard in Brooklyn—"has gone to your head. Don't make a fool of yourself."

"Those newspaper rats are already doing that. I might as well help them along."

I led the way down the hall to a bathroom, Big Ben following behind, hiccupping at every step. It sounded like a rolling barrage. I splashed cold water in my face, washed away the blood and found that I looked fairly presentable.

Over the cannonading of Big Ben's hiccups, I could hear a babel of excited voices from the living room and I hastily dried my face. "Hope we're not too late," I said, as we started down the stairs toward the living room.

The bejeweled dowagers were not looking up at Dear Boy, now. And they were not bejeweled any more! There wasn't a piece of jewelry in the whole roomful of gals.

They were huddled together in an excited, jabbering cluster and Dear Boy was standing over by the fireplace, weakly holding a dainty handkerchief to his jaw, his eyes wide with fright and his nice marcel wave terribly rumpled. Then I looked over to the other side of the room and said, "Oh-oh!"

Captain Barlow and Lieutenant Cronin were standing talking to Mrs. Wilkinson.

"You drunken, ivory-headed ape!" Captain Barlow whispered to me as he came up. "Do you know what you've done? While you were out back, swilling drinks, Baldy Martin crashed in here and cleaned out the whole damned place!"

"You sure it was Baldy?" I asked weakly.

Big Ben rolled into the room under

cover of that barrage of hiccups and the captain had to raise his voice.

"Of course I'm sure, you lame brained stew-pot! He had on a mask but everybody got a good look at that bald dome of his. And on his way out, he meets this poet, here, and gives him a clout on the jaw. This is your finish, Dugan."

I pushed Captain Barlow to one side and went over to where Dear Boy was holding his hankie to his jaw. "I know just how you feel, Gerald," I said jovially. "The nasty brute damn near killed me too." I slapped him in comradely manner on the shoulder.

Did he flinch from that light touch or was it just wishful thinking?

"You know, Gerald, I always wondered who was the finger man for the Martin boys and I never could have figured it out if you hadn't dropped this."

I held up the bit of white and yellow adhesive tape and at the same time snatched at that marceled hair! Boy! Did I start something!



GERALD'S toupee came off in my hands, another bit of that white and yellow adhesive showing on the underside of it, and at the same moment I felt a violent push that sent me crashing against the fireplace.

And then a hot-eyed, baldheaded killer was standing out in the middle of the room, just at the edge of that cluster of women, raising a gun in his hands.

"Okay, Dugan," he snarled. "You got the rest of the boys, by dumb luck. Now let's see how good your luck is!"

That black automatic was pointed directly at me and I thought well, this is it.

Mrs. Wilkinson was staring in horrified disbelief at that bald, glistening dome. "And to think that I used to run my hands through that—that wig!" she murmured.

Suddenly she took a step forward and swung one ponderous arm at Baldy.

That wildly swinging arm caught him with a loud slap against the ears and it looked to me like he was actually lifted from the floor. He landed right in front of Captain Barlow and as he scrambled to his feet, he jerked his gun up.

I saw him twist frantically, as I jumped forward, saw him chop down with that gun and saw Captain Barlow slump to the floor. Then I saw that gun-hand grow steady and knew that there was only one thing to do.

I hurled myself straight onto that maddened killer, just as he fired! There was a stinging burn across my ribs and then we were rolling across the floor and I looked up and saw Lieutenant Cronin reaching down, clubbing that bald dome.

I swear to Pete that I never did remember going back to the pantry and putting the rest of that bottle of ancient rum in my pocket but I must have because I remember putting up one hell of an argument when the Doc, down at the station house, tried to take it away from me.

But I do remember the payoff that came when we were in the back room of the station house, sorting over the jewelry we had found on Baldy and listening to him tell of the long list of robberies—and two murders—that he and his brothers had committed. When he had finished, Lieutenant Cronin turned to me with what was almost a smile.

"Well, Dugan, you seem to have done all right for once, in spite of the fact that you may—ah—have had a drink or two, while on duty. You brought down a vicious criminal and you also saved Captain Barlow's life."

"Yup," Captain Barlow said gruffly, "I guess we'll have to overlook your drinking for this once, Dugan, although—hey!"

He was staring at Cronin with stark horror in his eyes. "What was that you just said? Dugan did what?"

"Why, he saved your life, sir," Cronin said. "Oh, I forgot, you missed that part. You see, sir, this rat was just getting ready to shoot you when Dugan jumped in and took the bullet himself."

For a moment Captain Barlow stood there, staring across the room with eyes that were absolutely sick. Then he deliberately walked over and socked Baldy.

"You let that drunken clown of a cop save my life, and now I'll never be able to ride him again. Oh! Oh!"

He started to work on Baldy again, but all the time I could tell he was imagining it was me!

HERR MAMLOCK'S

A Novelette of International Intrigue



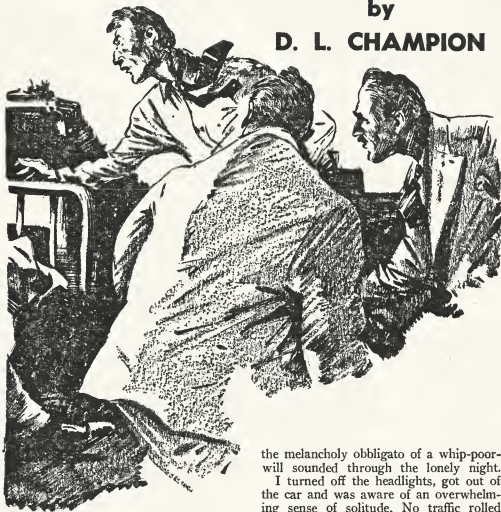
Morehead was sided by a couple of partners he didn't trust, on a mission involving death and diamonds in Old Mexico. Things worked out no better than he expected when he found himself betrayed by his criminal partners, and helpless under the gun of a Nazi spy. Then one of the crooks made a remark as eloquent in its own way as Patrick Henry's. He said, "I'd rather be an American crook than a Nazi banker,"—and proved it.

SHINY SHOES

"Don't move—any of you."

by

D. L. CHAMPION



CHAPTER ONE

Mission to Mexico

THE moon was full and bright. Across the swamp I could see the prison walls blackly silhouetted against the silver sky. The croaking of a thousand frogs rattled in my ears and

the melancholy obbligato of a whip-poor-will sounded through the lonely night.

I turned off the headlights, got out of the car and was aware of an overwhelming sense of solitude. No traffic rolled along the dirt road where I waited. As far as I could see no light showed. I felt as if I were the only human being in all of southern Texas. I knew better.

Somewhere out there in the swamp between me and the prison were two men. I had never met Hardy and Grackle, yet during the next week or so I would have to depend on them as I had never depended upon anyone before. It was the most important job I had ever undertaken, and Hardy and Grackle whose last two years had been spent behind those

distant penitentiary walls were not the assistants I would have chosen myself. The choice, however, was not mine.

I started nervously as I heard the snapping of a twig. It was purely a reflex action which thrust my right hand inside my coat until it rested on the automatic in my shoulder holster. A massive dark figure loomed up from the swamp and moved toward me.

A voice, husky and unpleasant, said, "Morehead? Is that you?"

I took my hand away from my gun and admitted my identity. The shapeless figure came nearer, materialized into two men.

The husky voice said, "I'm Grackle."

* * *

I SHOOK hands with them both and looked them over in the strong grey light of the moon. Hardy was short, round faced and barrel chested. His shoulders were wide, his features coarse. His sandy hair and light complexion somehow reminded me of the Minnesota plains where he had been born.

Olin Hardy had traveled a long way from the farm whence he had come. And the trail which led from the fertile valley of the north to the penitentiary gates was littered with cracked safes. What Hardy couldn't open with his amazingly sensitive fingers, he could blast with a skill which would astonish a dynamite man.

Grackle was a bird of other plumage. His shoulders were thin, his cheeks pale. His prison denims fit him loosely. But I knew that in his days of freedom his suits were extremely cut and almost skin tight.

Grackle was a Broadway boy. He had first seen daylight at a point between Borough Hall and Ebbets Field and he had an accent to prove it. He had been a pool shark, a bookmaker, a fixer of horse races and a devotee of various other murky professions. He had developed a great talent for picking pockets and it was this latter skill which had eventually led him into jail.

"What about clothes?" said Hardy in a deep bass voice three notes lower than the croaking of the bull frogs.

"There's a suitcase in the back of the car," I told them. "Take off those denims and change. And hurry. I want to hit the border at dawn."

When they had changed into respectable garb I took two documents from my wallet, handed one document to each of them.

"What's this?" asked Hardy.

"Tourist cards. You'll need them to cross the border."

"How about gas?" said Grackle. His husky voice and East River accent grated against my eardrums. "I hear gas is tough to get these days."

"Not for the guy we're working for," I said.

I stepped on the starter and we roared along through the Texan night. The sun came up when we were half way between San Antonio and Laredo. Hardy's sigh broke a long silence.

He said, "This is a big job, huh?"

"Bigger than anything you've ever tried," I told him.

"How much cash involved?" asked Grackle.

"Two million dollars."

Hardy gasped. He said, incredulous, "In cash?"

"In cash," I repeated. Then something occurred to me which had occurred before. I slowed the car down and looked back at them over my shoulder. "You guys aren't getting any ideas, are you?"

Hardy shook his head. "I was just wondering."

Grackle didn't say anything. He stared off into space as though bringing every mental faculty to bear upon the conception of a number as high as two million. There was a shrewd calculating expression on his face that disturbed me. I was aware of an impending sense of trouble. I was aware of an even stronger sense that the trouble would come from Grackle.

I pushed the accelerator down again. In two hours we crossed the Rio Grande and entered Nueva Laredo. We had a weird and fiery breakfast of *rancheros* and *Habanero*.

Monterrey lies something under two hundred miles due south of Texas. The road is narrow, straight and incredibly hot. Desert speckled with dry green cacti, spread out on either side of us. Far in

the distance loomed high rocky mountains devoid of vegetation.

We entered the second city of Mexico at noon. I drove slowly through narrow streets. Since I spoke profane Spanish as well as classical I had little trouble ridding us of the hundred volunteer guides who assailed the running board.

I brought the car to a stop before a rambling stucco structure labelled Hotel del Vista.

"All right," I said, "we get out here."

"I thought we were going right through to Mexico City," said Hardy.

"We are. We're to meet a guy here first. He's to tell us who we see farther South. I guess you know what I mean."

cost anyway seventy or eighty bucks?"

"Right. Is he in there?"

An odd smile flickered across Grackle's thin lips. "He's in there, all right. But he's in no condition to put the finger on anyone."

I was aware of a sudden emptiness at the pit of my stomach. Hardy and I started for the bedroom door. I stood on the threshold and stared at the bed. Sutton lay upon his back. His eyes were bulging and they stared blankly at the ceiling. He was completely dressed. And completely motionless.

"Sutton," I called. "Sutton!"

"He's dead," said Grackle. "Or, anyway, his pulse isn't beating. I tried it."

TELL IT TO THE MARINES—

**That every working man and woman in the U. S. A.
is backing up their fight with 10% by New Year's!**

Grackle grinned. "The finger man, eh?"

Somehow the phrase annoyed me. "In a sense," I said curtly, "the finger man."

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AT the hotel desk I asked for Senior Sutton and was directed to a suite on the second floor. We tramped up the wide staidcase and I knocked at Sutton's door. I knocked three times without result. I tried the knob. It turned.

We entered a vacant living room, high ceilinged and looking out over a floral patio. There was a closed door to our left which apparently led to a bedroom. However, there was no sign of Sutton.

I lit a cigarette and registered annoyance. "He knew quite well when we'd arrive," I said. "He should be here. There are enough complications on this job without him messing things up."

Grackle opened the bedroom door. He entered the room and emerged a moment later.

"This Sutton," he said, "is he a tall blond guy who'd be wearing a suit that

I tried it myself. There was no answering beat and the flesh was barely warm.

Hardy said over my shoulder, "From his eyes and his face it looks to me as if he'd been strangled."

I nodded. I loosened Sutton's tie. I unbuttoned his collar. An angry red mark encircled his neck.

"Strangled is right," I said.

"What do we do now?" asked Grackle.

"Get out of town," I said. "Let's get going to Mexico City before we're tied up with this corpse. Fix his collar and tie again. We'll leave the body exactly as we found it."

Hardy refastened the dead man's collar, retied his tie. I returned to the living room and lit a cigarette. I hadn't expected this job was going to be easy. I had, however, expected complete secrecy. Somewhere, somehow, something had leaked. Sutton's corpse was grim evidence of that. . . .

We crossed the tropic of Capricorn at dusk and ate a late dinner in Tamazunchale which lay at the foot of the great plateau at the crest of which was Mexico City.

I was preoccupied as I ate. Sutton's murder had made my task more difficult. As Grackle had said, Sutton was the finger man. It had been he who was to have told me the name of the man I sought in Mexico City.

Hardy sipped black Mexican coffee and regarded me over the rim of his cup.

"Now we're this close," he said. "You may as well tell us what we're looking for?"

"We're looking for a man," I said. "A man who has two million dollars in cash, a vast amount of diamonds and, most important of all, the name of the firm in Brazil that sold him those diamonds."

Grackle blinked. "I don't get it."

"You're not supposed to," I said and returned to my meal.

"Who is this guy?" asked Hardy. "Who is he and where do we find him?"

I put down my cup and shrugged my shoulders gloomily. "That's what Sutton knew. That's why he was killed."

"What's the population of Mexico City?" asked Grackle.

"A million, nine hundred thousand."

"And we're looking for one guy?"

Grackle laughed unpleasantly. "Well, what the hell, it's better than sitting in that rat trap back in Texas."

We got back into the car. I reflected that I liked Grackle about as much as I trusted him.

CHAPTER TWO

Yellow Diamonds

WE drove all night over the perilous mountain road which eventually brought us up to the great plateau, some nine thousand feet high. We entered the city's level streets shortly after dawn. I parked the car at a little hotel on the Avenue Republic de Uruguay. I registered for a three room suite, sent Grackle and Hardy upstairs while I made a telephone call for new instructions in the light of Sutton's murder.

Grackle regarded me curiously when I came into the living room.

"Well," he said, "what now? Have you found out who it is we're looking for?"

"I think so. They're sending a man

up here this evening. He's a Mexican who's reputed to know of every undercover deal that goes on in the country."

Juan Hernandez was slim, tall and overdressed. His hair was black as ebony at midnight and his eyes were even darker than that. He stood in the doorway, bowed courteously and said, "I understand I may be of service to you, *senores?*"

"We are looking for a man," I said, coming to the point at once. "A European. He is dealing in Brazilian diamonds. He is buying them with United States currency. His dealings are huge—too huge to keep entirely secret. And I'm afraid I can't tell you much more than that."

"It should be enough," said Hernandez. "I know every fence, every spy, every thief and every murderer in Mexico. They are my friends. I can get this information for you."

"Tonight?"

"Quite likely, tonight."

Hernandez stood quite still, beaming at me. Grackle grinned. He said, "How much?"

"Five thousand pesos," said Hernandez. "Five thousand pesos now. Five thousand more when I return with the information."

I dug into my wallet. I could manage the first five thousand. The second I wouldn't be able to procure until the morning. I said so.

Hernandez shrugged. "I must insist on the second payment before I give my information. I shall take this first five thousand pesos now. You will raise the rest while I am away."

He stuffed the bank notes in his pocket and strode gracefully out the door.

"An adamant character," I said. "The Lord only knows where I can raise another five thousand pesos at this hour of the night."

I went to the phone and began the first of several calls. My connections in Mexico City were strictly limited. I was able to get in touch with only one of them. He did not have five thousand pesos in cash.

Frowning, I hung up the telephone. Hardy sat by the window, staring out into the lighted avenue below. Grackle regarded me quizzically.

"What now?" he asked, sardonically.

"This Hernandez," I said, "I'll have to talk to him. Stall him until tomorrow."

Grackle laughed unpleasantly. "You don't know much about crooks," he said. "It's too easy to doublecross a crook. He can't afford to trust anyone. Hernandez won't talk until he collects."

"I want that information tonight, if he has it."

"Then pay him."

"How?"

Grackle's eyes narrowed. "I have an idea," he said. Despite my questioning he would not say more.

A little before eleven o'clock the phone rang and Hernandez was announced. I told the desk to send him up. Grackle got out of his chair hastily.

"The Mexicans are a courteous people," he said. "Perhaps, it will be more polite if I go downstairs and bring him up."

He slid out the door. He returned a few minutes later with Hernandez in tow.

* * *

HERNANDEZ bowed and his smile showed even, magnificent teeth. "Senor," he said, "I have not failed you. I have the name of your man. Moreover, I can tell you exactly where he is at this very moment."

"Good," I said, "where is he and who is he?"

Hernandez' smile grew broader. "This is a matter of some five thousand pesos."

"In the morning," I said, "I promise you the money as soon as the bank opens tomorrow."

Hernandez bowed again. "I promise you the information at the same hour, *senor*."

"Time is important to me, Hernandez."

"Money, *senor*, is important to me."

Grackle shook his head and sighed. "All right, Morehead," he said. "I trust you. I'll advance you the cash. You can pay me in the morning."

He thrust his hand into his pocket and withdrew a huge sheaf of bills. He counted out five thousand pesos on the table and returned a few notes to his pocket. Hernandez picked them up.

"Your man's name is Mamlock," he said. "Hans Mamlock. At this moment

he is at the Rio Rita night club. I am happy to have been of service."

He turned on his high heel and left us. The instant the door closed Grackle burst into a roar of laughter. I turned an accusing eye on him.

"Where did you get that money?"

"I rolled him," said Grackle, "in the elevator on the way up. That dough we just paid him is the same money we paid him before. I just snatched his wallet out of his pocket. Here it is."

He tossed a leather wallet on the table. I stared at him and found myself in the unenviable position of once more accepting a favor from Grackle whose methods I deplored and who I didn't like personally at all.

"All right," I said curtly. "I hope you can do as good a job on Mamlock."

"What happens to him?"

"We'll go to the night club at once. I want you to get Mamlock's wallet. Perhaps, there's information there which will lead us to the things we want. If not, we'll have to trail him until he leads us to his hiding place. Once there, Hardy can go to work on the safe. But you're first, Grackle. I want Mamlock's wallet."

Grackle put on his hat. "It's as good as in your pocket right now."

The Rio Rita was running full blast at the stroke of midnight when we arrived. A stringed orchestra vibrated with a maddening conga rhythm. The dance floor was crowded with gyrating couples. We took a small table near the door and I cast my eyes about to find someone who might be Mamlock.

The moment I set eyes on him I was certain I was right. He was a big man, with wide shoulders. His eyes were blue and cold as the North Sea. His hair was blond as the ripe grass in a Bavarian meadow. On the left side of his face was a sabre cut. He stood at the bar drinking a cocktail.

I whispered to Grackle. Then I stood up and weaved my way through the dancers to Mamlock. I stood beside him at the bar. I looked at him with deliberate curiosity. He returned my gaze without embarrassment.

"Is your name Mamlock?" I asked.

"I've seen you somewhere before."

"My name is Mamlock. I doubt that

you have ever seen me before tonight."

I nodded my head almost imperceptibly in signal to Grackle.

"In Brazil," I said. "I've seen you in Rio, haven't I?"

Mamlock regarded me suspiciously. Before he could reply, Grackle staggered toward him, simulating drunkenness. The collision knocked the breath from Mamlock. Grackle holding onto the bar for support, apologized profusely. Mamlock scowled at him. Grackle weaved away again in the direction of the men's room. Five minutes later I followed him.

I ran through Mamlock's wallet hastily.

"Taxco," I said to Grackle. "*Ex conventa dos*, Taxco, Gro. There are half a dozen letters addressed to Mamlock there, also a rent receipt. I'll bet what we're looking for is there."

"Taxco? Where's that?"

"A hundred kilometers from here."

We picked up Hardy, returned to the hotel, climbed into the car and headed at top speed for the *Camino Cuernavaca*, the road that lead over the towering mountains to the most picturesque village of Mexico—Taxco.

Ex conventa dos was a tiny house two doors from an abandoned convent. My shoulder forced the door. Switching on the light, we found ourselves inside a comfortably furnished living room on the far wall of which was a huge Aztec tapestry. I crossed the room and drew the tapestry aside, revealing the circular steel door of a wall safe.

"All right, Hardy," I said. "Earn your pay."



HARDY went to work. With the aid of nothing more than a chisel of cold steel, the task took him no longer than twenty minutes. There were three tin boxes in the safe and a brief case. Hardy forced the boxes. Grackle whistled at the bundles of currency which filled two of them. The third was loaded with envelopes filled with tiny yellow diamonds. The brief case held certain names and addresses which were of even more importance to me than the cash and jewels.

The sun had risen splendidly over the vast sprawling city as we returned. I was

aware of a suppressed excitement within me as I maneuvered the car through reckless traffic. I had done what I had set out to do in spite of unforeseen difficulties.

In forty-eight more hours I would be back home again, prepared to deliver the goods. I glanced at Grackle beside me. There was a dreamy thoughtful expression on his pinched features. I admitted to myself that I had reason to be grateful to Grackle. Nevertheless, I still could not find it in my heart to trust him.

Grackle, I felt quite certain, would commit double murder for far less wealth than we carried in the car. I was much more at ease about Hardy. Hardy lacked Grackle's ambition and imagination. He performed his assigned task for a price. The price was satisfactory and that was an end of things.

We parked at the hotel entrance. We lugged the three tin boxes upstairs. I carried the brief case personally. I closed the door of the suite behind us and locked it.

"I'll order some coffee," I announced. "We'll have showers and freshen up. Then we'll start back to the border again. Every minute we spend here is dangerous."

I opened the brief case, intending to memorize the names and addresses and destroy the rest of the papers. Grackle, standing at my side, looked down at the three boxes and sighed.

"Two million bucks in cash," he said reverently. "A box filled with diamonds. And I'll bet that stuff in the brief case would bring a price, too, eh, Morehead?"

"You'd better stop thinking along those lines, Grackle," I said. "You've done your part. You'll be paid as you were promised. You'll—"

Grackle, I noted suddenly, was paying no attention to me at all. He was staring beyond me in the direction of Hardy behind my back. There was surprise in Grackle's gaze—surprise tempered with a gentle mockery.

"Morehead," he said, "you've been making a mistake. Ever since yesterday, I've known you were kind of thinking I might step out of line. I guess you've been suspecting the wrong guy."

I turned my head around as Hardy's voice, grating and vibrant, drilled into my ears.

"Put up your hands," said Hardy. "Both of you."

His eyes, customarily dull, glittered greedily. His breath came fast and there was a cruel twist to his lips. He held an automatic in his hand and there was no doubting either his resolve or his purpose.

"Hardy," I said, "are you crazy? You can't get away with this. You—"

"Keep them up, Major Morehead. You, too, Grackle. First, I want your guns."

He lifted mine deftly from my shoulder holster. He moved around me cautiously and took Grackle's weapon from his hip. He licked his lips.

He said in a hoarse sensual tone, "A couple of days ago I was a mug in stir. Now I'm a millionaire. Grackle, open them boxes. I just want to look at all that dough."

Grackle smiled and bent over the boxes. He said, with the faintest jeer in his voice, "Have you ever read *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Hardy?"

Hardy didn't answer. He backed away to the wall in order to keep plenty of space between himself and surprise attack and glanced for an instant at the neat packages

of bills in the tin box. His eyes blinked.

I took a deep breath. It was quite possible that Hardy was going to get away with this over my dead body, but not under any other circumstances. I cleared my throat, preparatory to risking my eloquence before risking my life.

"Hardy," I said, "be reasonable. There was a guy up in Washington that trusted you. You can't let him down."

"Ah," murmured Grackle with irritating irony, "the appeal to his better nature."

CHAPTER THREE

Partners In and Out of Crime

"HARDY," I went on, "you got a break. Army Intelligence figured we'd have to fight fire with fire when we tackled Mamlock. We had to keep under cover and at the same time we had to get hold of three things. The money he'd smuggled out of the United States, the diamonds he bought in Brazil and the name of the dealer to hand over to the Brazilian Government."

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"So," said Grackle, "you guys figured that an expert pickpocket and a crack safe blower would be much more proficient than anyone else. Unfortunately, Washington's brass hats aren't talented in those directions."

"True," I said. "Are you listening, Hardy? So we made a deal with you guys. Put this job over and you were free. Unconditional pardons for each of you. Moreover, instead of rotting in that prison, you could actually do something for your country."

Grackle's grin grew broader. "The appeal to patriotism," he said, *sotto voce*.

I glared at him. Hardy still had not spoken. My oratory, I realized, was something less than Churchill's. My next move would have to be physical.

Hardy looked at me over his gun barrel. He shifted his gaze to Grackle.

"Grackle," he said, "I been thinking it over. I'll cut you in. We'll have to knock off the major. We can split this loot. We can get down to South America, live like kings. We can sell the diamonds and I guess we can sell the stuff in that brief case. Naturally, I won't give you half. But twenty percent is more than you ever figured you'd be worth, at that."

An overwhelming sense of futility and desperation swept over me. With both Grackle and Hardy against me the situation was almost hopeless. To knock two of them down without arms was too close to the impossible.

Inwardly, I raged at myself for a careless fool. I should have disarmed them both the instant we had what we'd come for. I cursed Brannigan, back in Washington, whose idea this had been.

Rather to my amazement Grackle had not yet snapped up Hardy's offer. He stood immobile, with half-closed eyes, calculating coolly, as if he were considering whether or not to buy a pair of shoes.

"Hardy," he said quietly, "I think I'll stay on this side."

"Are you haggling?" said Hardy. "Twenty-five percent."

Grackle shook his head. "I'm not haggling. I don't want any part of it, at all."

I was too tense to register my surprise. I was figuring my chances of knocking Hardy cold with my right while I snatched

HERR MAMLOCK'S SHINY SHOES

his gun with a quick left-handed reach.

Hardy blinked at Grackle. "What's the matter with you? Getting religion?"

"I'm not getting religion," said Grackle slowly. "I'm just not as dumb as you. That's all."

"Dumb? With two million bucks? Sure, I'm dumb like Henry Ford."

"You're a crook," said Grackle. "For which I can't criticize you. I'm a crook myself. But you're too damned dumb to think. Too dumb to have a philosophy."

"Philosophy?" said Hardy. "Whatever that is, it ain't for a punk like you."

"It is," said Grackle. "You see, I'm a thief. I steal from people. Maybe in all my life I harmed, say, a couple of thousand persons. Individual persons. But I'm an American crook, at that, and I'm damned if I'd harm the entire country. I'd rather be an American crook than a German banker. Do you get it?"

"No," said Hardy.

* * *

GRACKLE sighed. "You probably never will. As I say, perhaps, I've harmed a couple of thousand people. There are guys much worse than me in the world and some of them are in Congress. They harm all the people for personal gain. I'll steal from an individual but I'm damned if I'll steal from the United States. Now, do you get it?"

"No," said Hardy. "All I get is that you ain't throwing in with me. All right, I'll do what I have to do and get the hell out of here."

I flexed my muscles and prepared to spring. I felt slightly better now. It seemed that once the battle with Hardy was joined, I could rely on Grackle being with me. Then, as I moved my head around a little, *I saw the shoes!*

They were black shoes and highly polished. Their tips protruded from the bottom of the woven curtain which covered the closet. Their toes glittered ominously in the sunlight streaking through the open French windows. I had seen those shoes before once. They had been attached to the feet of Hans Mamlock.

I gestured frantically to Hardy and Grackle. This was no time for civil war.

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DETECTIVE TALES

Mamlock, in all probability, had us covered all the time. Hardy's automatic had never actually dominated the situation at all. Mamlock had concealed himself in the closet before our arrival. He had listened to every word we had spoken. He had us under the muzzle of his gun all the time.

Grackle glanced down at the black shoe tips. His shrewd little eyes glittered as he took in the situation. Hardy looked down quickly, then fixed his eyes on us again. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again.

Grackle pantomimed frantically to him. Slowly Hardy's obtuse brain absorbed the fact that unless he attended to the menace behind the curtain he would never live to get his loot out of the room. On the other hand, if he turned his attention to Mamlock it was more than probable, that he'd lose control of Grackle and myself.

I moved a step backward across the room toward the table where Hardy had laid my gun. As I did so, Hardy, apparently, came to the conclusion that his danger from Mamlock was greater than his danger from Grackle and myself.

Putting his back to the wall, he spun around, so that he faced the curtain. He blasted two shots. I stretched out my arm to snatch my own gun. My muscles froze with my fingers two scant inches from its butt as a voice from the rear said quickly, "Don't move. Any of you."

It was Mamlock's voice. And it did not come from the closet. It was projected from the bathroom door at the other side of the room. The three of us stood immobile staring at the closet curtain.

"You," said Mamlock, "you with the thick chest, drop that gun."

Hardy hesitated, the thought of prodigious loot uppermost in his mind.

"Shall I kill you now?" demanded Mamlock.

He placed a slight emphasis on the final word of the sentence. Hardy's gun clattered to the floor.

"You may all turn around," said Mamlock.

We did so. Mamlock stood framed in the bathroom doorway. I noted at once that he wore no shoes. There was a faint smile upon his thin lips and a mordant expression in his eyes.

HERR MAMLOCK'S SHINY SHOES

"I am grateful to you, barrel-chest," he said to Hardy. "You lightened my task by disarming your companions. I must say, however, you are all damned unob-servant. I've been waiting for some time for you to see my shoes in the closet there."

Hardy blinked. He looked down at Mamlock's stockinged feet and shook his head. "I don't get it," he said. "What the hell was the idea of planting your shoes in the closet?"

"He didn't have the guts," said Grackle, "to try to take the three of us while we were facing him."

"Guts?" said Mamlock, lifting his eyebrows. "Discretion, perhaps, is the better word. True, I preferred to make my appearance known while your backs were turned. Then, too much gunplay, might have aroused the hotel people."

He paused, fixed me with his cold blue eyes, and shook his head mockingly.

"I am amazed that your Government should put its trust in such crooked characters. After Hernandez told me that he had apparently been paid twice with the same five thousand dollars I realized there was a pickpocket in our midst. After I saw my safe at Taxco, I realized we also had a safe cracker with us."

"You overplayed the hand. When Hernandez found out he had been cheated, he came promptly to me and told me everything. I traveled at once to Taxco, after I recalled the fact that I had been jostled by your pickpocket. There, I found my safe blown. I returned here and waited for you."

* * *

"THAT'S the one thing which puzzles me," I said. "How could you have arrived in Taxco after us, yet beaten us back here. There is no airfield in those mountains. No car passed us on the road."

Mamlock chuckled. "There is a railroad."

"Not in Taxco," I said. "No railroad runs there."

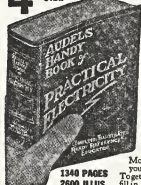
"There is a railroad at Iguala, twenty kilometers from Taxco. I drove there and made a connection. I was in Mexico City

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DETECTIVE TALES

at least fifteen minutes before you were."

He laughed. He said to Hardy, "You will hand me my shoes. Slide them across the floor."

Hardy did so. Mamlock stepped into them without bending over. "I shall collect my belongings and leave you. I am sorry to deprive you of these riches, bal-rel-chest. Very sorry. But my country needs them more than you. We need the money to buy the diamonds. We need the brief case because that contains the names of the Brazilian dealers from whom we buy the diamonds."

"But why do you want the diamonds?" said Hardy. "How the hell can you win a war with diamonds?"

"The major can tell you that," said Mamlock. "Diamonds cut metal. We need them to make machine tools. We need machine tools to make guns and bombs. We need guns and bombs to kill your soldiers. To wipe out the arrogant race which is America. Each diamond means perhaps a thousand casualties—for your side."

Hardy frowned as if his slow functioning brain was having difficulty assimilating this information. I glanced over at Grackle. He nodded his head almost imperceptibly. A relief flooded me. To jump Mamlock was going to be an even greater risk than jumping Hardy. But if Grackle was with me our chances were better. And win, draw or die, it had to be done.

I looked at Grackle again, winked and braced myself. I drew a deep breath.

Then, to my utter astonishment, Hardy moved before I did. He charged across the room with his arms flailing. Mamlock moved his wrist slightly, muttered a growling, guttural curse. A report echoed through the room and there was a red gaping wound in Hardy's shoulder. He still came on.

The second shot smashed into Hardy's body an inch above his heart. He pitched forward against Mamlock. For an instant Mamlock's gun was aimed at the ceiling. I hurled myself at him, grabbing for his gun hand. Grackle snatched a thirty-eight up from the table where Hardy had laid it.

Hardy fell, with an odd gurgling sound, to the floor. Mamlock swung a hard right

HERR MAMLOCK'S SHINY SHOES

full in my face. He wrenched his right wrist with all his strength and broke my hold. The muzzle of his automatic swung around in my direction.

I heard two sharp reports. Mamlock's face assumed a dazed expression. Blood ran crazily from a hole in his temple. His fingers were suddenly inert. His gun dropped, thudding on Hardy's head where he lay upon the floor.

Mamlock was upon his knees. His lips moved slowly, painfully. He uttered half a dozen words in a foreign tongue. His eyes closed. His face screwed itself up in agony. He pitched forward upon his crimson face.

Grackle dropped his thirty-eight. We both sprang to Hardy's side. I picked up his pulse and could barely feel the answering beat.

"A doctor," said Grackle. "You speak the lingo, Morehead. Phone down."

"For what?" whispered Hardy. "The rat got me in the heart. I won't be here when the doctor comes."

Grackle looked down at him and there was pity in his shrewd black eyes.

"Why did you do it?" he asked. "What made you jump him all by yourself? Why take such a big chance?"

Hardy essayed a grin. "That dough," he gasped. "I was sore at him for making me lose all that dough."

"Are you sure?" I said. "Was that the only reason?"

"Well," said Hardy and I had to bend my ear to his lips to distinguish the words, "partly that. And I got sore when he said each of those diamonds would cause a thousand casualties. Maybe—maybe—like Grackle said—I'm an American crook, after all."

There was no beat at all in his pulse now. His wrist was inert in my hand. His eyes stared unseeing up at the ceiling.

"I'll be damned," said Grackle and there was an odd break in his voice. "He lived a crook, a bum and a no-good. And he died like any one of our boys in Africa."

"Let that be his epitaph," I said.

I went to the phone and called the embassy. There was a peculiar blurr in my throat and my eyes were blurred with tears.

THE END

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